

伏見つかさ

Tsukasa Fushimi

Illustration♦かんざきひろ

5



■ore no imouto ga
konnani kawaii
wake ga nai 5

電撃文庫



9784048682718

ISBN978-4-04-868271-8

C0193 ¥550E



1920193005509



ASCII
MEDIA
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **550 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます



k u r o n e k o



Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai Volume 5

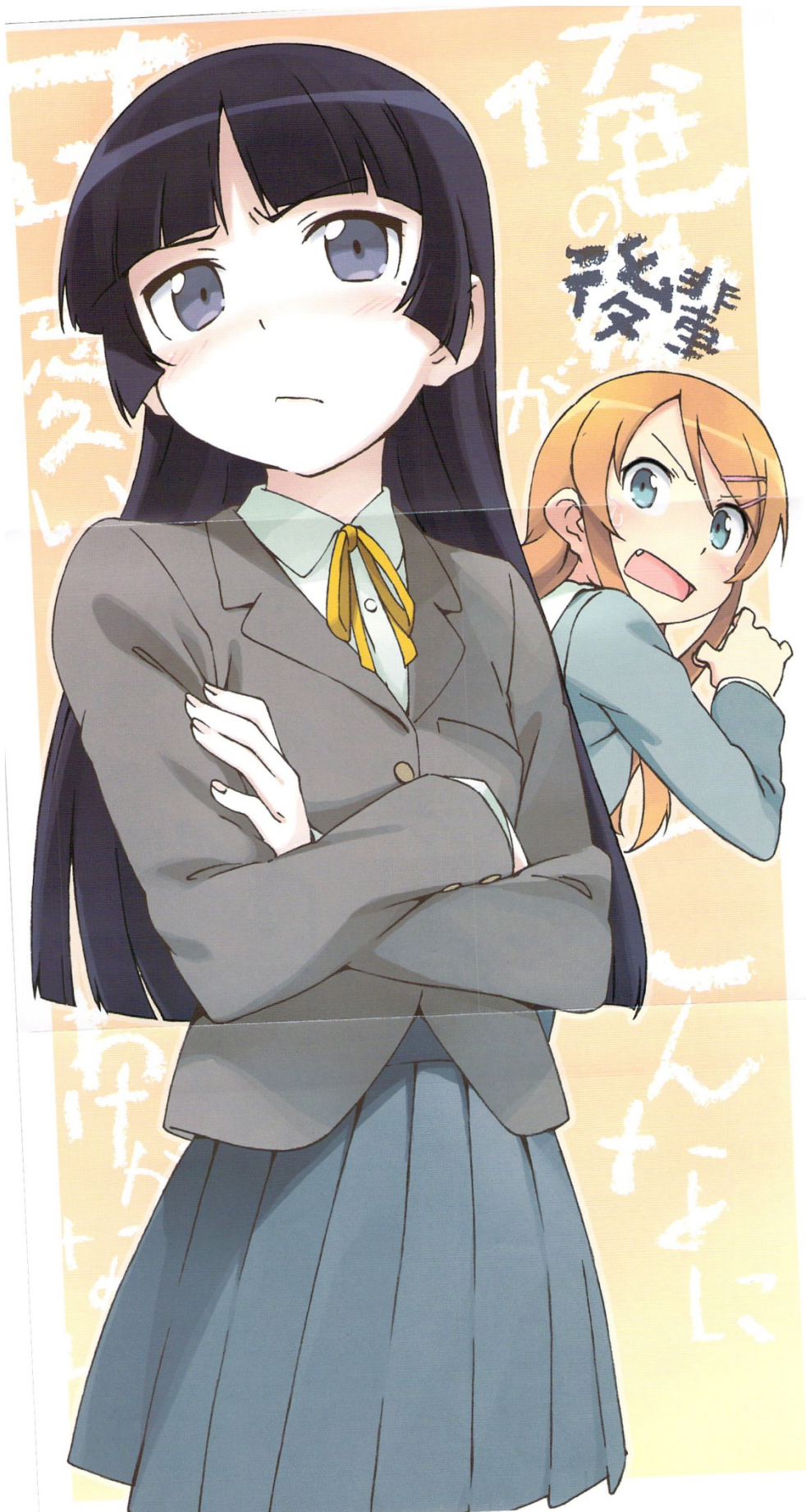
Written by : Tsukasa Fushimi

Illustration by : Kanzaki Hiro

English Translation by NanoDesu Translations

DISCLAIMER: The work translated here is the legal property of its original copyright holder. It is translated here without monetary incentive solely for the purposes of promoting domestic interest in the work and improving personal language proficiency. Should the work be licensed for English translation or upon request by the original copyright holders, please stop distribution of this document at once.

Please send any and all comments to NanoDesuTranslations@gmail.com



川川
册册

生年一萬

新キヤワケ
 紹介
 (昭和十一年出版)

新キャラクター紹介

(Bottom Right)

New Character Introductions

(Narrator: Makabe Kaede)

Hmm. if I were to describe that person in one phrase, I would probably say he was an eccentric weirdo. Yes, you can already see that he's a weirdo, but on the inside he's an even bigger hentai. And even more than that, he's an idiot. A huge idiot. And what's more, the types of girls he's into seems to be limited to 2D lolis. Honest to God, I have no idea what he's going to do in the future if he's like this... I'm being too mean? Ahaha, it's alright, senpai. After all, I'm usually the one who suffers the most from all the bad jokes he pulls. So just let me complain a little. Oh, right right, just recently, he brought a Makaizou¹ figure and put it in my room without me knowing about it, and because of that, my sister came face to face with a completely naked Hatsune *ku while she was cleaning my room. Even now, my sister blushes every time she sees my face, but what can I do about it?

Ahem. Well, that might be true, but... if you ask me if I hate that person, then I would have to say that I don't at all. If I hated him, I wouldn't have stuck with him for over a year. But how should I put it... that person might be an idiot, but he's still a good person, and he's almost abnormally forward-looking. Maybe it's because he always just wants to enjoy life... but for better or worse, he doesn't spare any effort when it comes to achieving his goals. For the same reason, if it comes down to finding different ways to enjoy life, I wouldn't be surprised if he would gladly put his own life on the line. At any rate, he seriously is funny in the head.

¹

A figure company specializing in figures that you shouldn't Google if you're at work.

But, for that reason, even while everyone shrinks back at his eccentricities, everyone follows him, becomes an idiot like him, and tries to have lots of fun, don't they?

(Top Left)

This girl,

She's a pretty cute girl, isn't she?

Hm? Ahh, right, if we're talking in terms of appearance, I guess you could say she looks pretty mature. And... her chest... is also pretty big, I guess? Ahh, no, it's not like that... I was talking about her personality there, her personality. She's really serious and unwilling to compromise... and she tends to stereotype everyone around her. Considering all that, she has quite a few flaws and gaps too, and the fact that she can't live up to her own ideals irritates her to no end... you could call it unwavering diligence, I guess. She tries to push herself too hard and follow unreasonable expectations... and I think that side of her is pretty cute. When I see her like that, I just can't help but want to cheer her on... or I should say, I just begin to feel like I can't leave her alone. But if I try to help, I'm sure that she would just scold me and tell me to mind my own business.... Hm? Ah, hahaha... well, that is... yeah, it's just as you think. Umm... well, I guess I can say it now, but when I first decided to talk to her, much of it was because of personal reasons like that...

Ah, what am I saying? Haha, how embarrassing.

... Well, the truth is, that's what the situation was. So I really do apologize for that time I asked senpai that rather mean-spirited question... ah, you didn't mind? Well, alright, that's fine then.

Hm? What do I think of her now, you ask?

Umm... Ummmmmmmm.... hmm...

..... That's really hard to say... a-ahahaha...

Contents

1. Chapter 1.....	1
2. Chapter 2.....	75
3. Chapter 3.....	194
4. Chapter 4.....	338
5. Afterword.....	423
6. Translation Credits.....	425

Chapter 1: Part 1

A month had passed since my little sister had disappeared.

However, don't think that her vanishing impacted my daily life in any way.

Even when I take into consideration every instance up until now, the only times my sister and I really interacted were the times she came to me for life advice.

Outside of those sessions, we lived our separate lives, not talking to each other, and not even trying to make eye contact.

My sister being home, my sister not being home; it wasn't like my life was better one way or the other.

... Alright, I'll be honest with you.

I was actually relieved that I wasn't getting wrapped up in strange situations now that she was gone.

Honestly, only good things came out of her leaving. She wasn't using the living room as her own personal fort anymore, she wasn't calling her friends over and chasing me out anymore, and given that she'd been using the room next door, I didn't have to worry about bothering her with loud music or by shouting from my own room anymore.

But, well... it's just that... I thought it was pretty anticlimactic to have that thing back then as our last life advice session... and I mean... in the very, very end, maybe I did think to myself that she had a slightly cute side too...

But no. I had spoken too soon.

That asshole. She left without saying a single damn word to me.

-

"Goodbye, aniki."

-

Hmph, do whatever the hell you want.

Part 2

And I lived with that attitude for just about a month, feeling refreshed through and through.

What's more, there was definitely a small something that had happened in my life too.

It was the first day of the new semester.

“Good morning, senpai.” ¹

She had turned around and said that.

Said that with a hint of a boastful look on her face, slightly flushed cheeks, and stiff shoulders.

I could tell by how she was acting right then that she was probably in quite a complicated state of mind.

She was a girl I was used to seeing in Gothic Lolita fashion, but she was now wearing my school's uniform...

¹ Senpai is an honorific reserved for people senior to you in school, while kouhai is reserved for people junior to you.

“..... Y-You..... uhh..... Kuroneko?”

“... H-Hmph, why are you making a face like that?”

Even though she was flustered, she still managed to choke out a haughty remark. And from that, I was now sure who this person was.

It was undoubtedly none other than Kuroneko in the flesh. My little sister's otaku friend, and one of my own precious friends as well.

She now faced me fully, and gently placed a hand on her chest, over her brand-new uniform.

“... Is it that surprising for me to be here?”

“That's not... well...”

I began to deny it, but I changed my mind.

“Yeah. It's pretty surprising. Umm... so... this means... does this really mean you're enrolling in the same high school as me?”

“Yes.”

Kuroneko nodded, looking pleased with herself, but then something suddenly seemed to occur to her, and her expression tightened.

“... But, don’t get the wrong idea and think I’m here because you’re here.”

“Well, yeah, I know.”

That much was obvious. She didn’t have to say that.

“I heard that you lived nearby, but I had no idea you would be going to the same high school. Also, if you were planning to do that, you could have at least told me. You really surprised me.”

“... That’s my choice, isn’t it? Even if I’d known we would be going to the same school, how does that have anything to do with you?”

“Well, I mean... I guess it does make me pretty happy.”

“.....”

Kuroneko shut her mouth tight. Her eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly buried her emotions and returned to an expressionless state.

But, now I understood.

When she had said *"In two months I'll start to call you something different,"* this is what she meant.

She would go from calling me "niisan" to "senpai."

I couldn't help but smile. I was usually pretty self-conscious, but for some reason, when it came to her I felt strangely open with my feelings. You could say that the less open she was, the more open I became.

"Well, kouhai, I'm looking forward to going to school with you. Haha, you know, it's pretty refreshing seeing you in a uniform."

"... Looking forward to it, senpai."

She responded in kind with a whisper, turned right around, and began to quickly walk off. I could faintly hear her mutter "what an idiot" as she went.

What's wrong with her? She got really moody really fast. I thought I had come to be able to read her pretty well through her emotionless mask, but I had to admit that this time, I was a bit stumped.

"Is she just nervous about the entrance ceremony or something?"

I began to chase after Kuroneko. But then I heard a voice coming from behind me.

“Kyou-chan... come on, answer me Kyou-chan~~.”

“Nnn... o-ohh...”

Manami was standing right next to me.

Tamura Manami. A plain-looking girl, who was both my classmate and my childhood friend.

“Sorry sorry, I completely forgot about you.”

“OooOOoo...”

Manami whacked me on the leg with her school bag.

So, let me fill you in on what was going on. When I was going to school with Manami like I always did, I saw the uniformed form of Kuroneko, and completely left Manami behind when I ran to catch up with her.

Manami probably saw that I had started talking to Kuroneko, so she stayed on the side and waited for us to finish.

“That girl you were just talking to, she’s a new student, right? Someone you know?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“A good friend?”

“Yeah.”

At least, I thought that. And I wanted to believe that Kuroneko thought that too.

“Well, the simplest way to put it is that she’s a mutual friend of mine and Kirino’s. She may seem pretty unfriendly on the surface, but she’s actually a really, really good person.”

Manami gave me a soft smile. Seeing her smile like that really put me at ease.

“Introduce me sometime.”

“Yeah.”

Manami nodded deeply, and then tossed out a casual question.

“... By the way, that girl, what’s her name?”

“Kuroneko.”

“Fweh?”

Manami cocked her head to the side. I could almost see a question mark floating above her head.

“Kuroneko-san? Umm... is that her last name? Or her first name?”

Ahh, right right. I had introduced Kuroneko in the most natural way, but I forgot that “Kuroneko” was just her handle name. And it’s not like Manami would know that if I just introduced her as “Kuroneko.”

I didn’t respond to Manami’s questions, so her imagination began running wild by itself.

“Ummmm... Kuro Neko-san? Ku Roneko-san? Kurone Ko-san?”

Don’t separate it like that, dammit.

“None of those. Sorry. ‘Kuroneko’ is actually just her handle name. Here, weren’t you the one who told me that I should try to find friends on SNS? That’s where I know her from.”

“A-Ahh... so that’s what happened.”

Seeming satisfied, Manami clapped her hands together.

“Well, it’s quite true that if you meet someone on the ‘Internet,’ you call them by their ‘handle names,’ so often you won’t even know their real names.”

“Yeah, exactly like that.”

“So, Kuroneko-san’s real name... Kyou-chan doesn’t know it?”

“... I don’t.”

Manami had asked me that question lightly, but for some strange reason her words reverberated deeply in my chest.

That’s true...

Take Kuroneko, or Saori... I really thought of them as good friends.

But in reality, I didn’t know anything about them. Their real names, their addresses, their schools... I didn’t know any of that. Well, I guess I could deduce Saori’s address from the mail label from that package she had sent me, but it’s not like I could confirm that with certainty. It was an unwritten rule that you didn’t pry into those things, so I had never dared to ask.

But now that Kuroneko was attending the same school that I was, the situation had changed.

A friend that I had met online and had always called by her nickname was now a kouhai at the same school. Even if only a little, that had to mean that our relationship with each other was going to change. I might be overthinking this, but I felt just a bit hopeful.

Ah, no no, it's not like I meant that in a romantic way or something.

It's just that, if one of your friends from outside started attending the same school as you, wouldn't you be excited?

We're going to have lots of fun from here on out... that was my firm belief.

"Hmmm....."

I stared off into the direction that Kuroneko had run off to, and muttered to nobody in particular.

"Kuroneko's real name... I wonder what it is..."

Part 3

“Gokou Ruri.”

Kuroneko averted her gaze slightly and muttered quietly.

“... That is my name in the human world.”

“Gokou?”

“You write it with the kanji for ‘five,’ and then the kanji for ‘getting late,’ as in ‘it’s getting late into the night.’”

Gokou Ruri.

Hm... Gokou Ruri, huh...?

Hmm.....

Awesome.

I got Kuroneko’s real name!

Good job, me! I got it out of her really easily too!

“... Creepy. Why are you smiling like that?”

“Don’t worry about it. Hmm, although... this’ll take a bit of getting used to. I’ve been calling you Kuroneko all this time.”

“... I suppose that’s true. It also feels strange to me. I never thought I would see the day where you would call me by my ‘human’¹ name. But you should continue to call me ‘Kuroneko’ outside of school.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

I gave a deep nod...

-

“..... And also, I should probably ask..... Why exactly are you two in my room?”

-

I finally let out the question I had been holding in for the longest time.

¹ She actually calls it her “over here” name, but I liberalized the translation a bit to improve flow.

Just so you know, the first day of school had ended. And we were, of course, all gathered in my room.

“Hah hah hah! Kyouusuke-shi, what are you saying all of a sudden?! Isn’t that something you should have asked the minute we came into your room? What kind of gag are you trying to play, waiting until we’ve talked for so long before going smoothly into that question?”

“Well, it’s because I was so shocked that I just couldn’t react properly until I could pull myself together, alright?! Okay... I’ll ask then. I’ll ask, you hear me? What the hell were you trying to do on that sheet you laid out on my floor?!”

“Well, obviously, I was doing a rough assembly of a Gunpla².”

“.....”

No, not *obviously*. Ugh, this is bad... I could feel my blood vessels bursting... Saori seemed to realize that I was getting annoyed, so she fixed her attitude and tried again.

“Well, obviously, I was doing a rough assembly of a Gunpla of Sazabi³.”

² Gundam model. Some assembly required.

³ Some specific Gundam. Do I care? Probably not.

“I’m not getting annoyed because I wanted to know what kind of Gunpla you were working on!”

Why the hell did it seem like every once in a while, this girl stopped understanding Japanese?

This girl’s name was Saori Bajeena.

She wore swirly, thick eyeglasses, dressed like an otaku, and was another of my and Kirino’s mutual friends.

Let me explain the situation again. When I came back to my room, it was already like this.

Kuroneko was still in her uniform, and was lying on my bed reading a manga magazine.

Saori had laid a sheet down on the floor, and was fiddling with a Gunpla model.

I couldn’t even react to that spectacle, and was left there standing in shock.

And then... I opened my mouth to say something, but I was so stunned that I ended up asking Kuroneko for her real name instead, something I had been thinking about for the entire day at school.

And that brings us right up to the verbal exchange we just had.

“Ugh...”

I massaged the bridge of my nose, and tried one more time to get my concerns across in an easily understood way.

“Let’s try one more time. Why exactly did you two come into my room, uninvited, and why are you now here occupying it without a care in the world!?”

“..... Hmph. If you get worked up over every single little detail, people are just going to think you’re a grouch. More importantly, you have guests, so why aren’t you bringing them some tea?”

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t realize I had guests!!”

Sorry for my incompetence! And also, don’t just go and lie on top of someone else’s bed like that!

Although, after Kuroneko made those outrageous demands, Saori casually followed up with a statement of her own.

“Actually, Kuroneko-shi invited me to come over. She thought you would be lonely, so she wanted to come and check on you. Isn’t that right, Ruri-chan?”

“If you would be so kind, please stop making up ridiculous things from thin air. And who the hell is Ruri-chan? Do you want to die?”

“Ku Ku Ku... Ruri-chan is just so shy. Weren’t you the one who wanted to visit today so you could show Kyouzuke-shi how you looked in your uniform?”

“A-Are you an idiot? Absolutely not. Anyways, he already saw me in a uniform this morning...”

“Hm? Hm Hm Hm? So that means... haha, so it’s like that.”

Saori looked at Kuroneko as if she could see right through her.

“And when you showed him your uniform, Kyouzuke-shi complimented you, didn’t he? He said, ‘it’s pretty refreshing to see you in that,’ or something like that, right? And then... Kuroneko-shi probably shot back with something cold, but she was happy about it on the inside, and so then she suddenly wanted to come and show Kyouzuke-shi her uniform one more time, yes? ... Fufu, I hit the nail on the head, didn’t I? Precisely on the head, didn’t I? Because there’s no other reason Kuroneko-shi would suddenly decide to stop wearing her trademark Gothic Lolita outfit.”

Saori began to give off a creepy-sounding laugh. Certainly, I had complimented Kuroneko on her uniform in the morning, and she had said something cold back to me, but Saori was over thinking the rest, wasn’t she?

The real Kuroneko also immediately denied that idea. She jerked up from her prone position on the bed.

“... Didn’t I tell you that you were wrong? I just didn’t feel like going out of my way to go back home and change.”

She quickly turned the other way.

Ah, and now she's in a bad mood.

But hm, now I see... it was like that... Kuroneko had a sister too, if I recall correctly, and because these two people were kind at heart, when they remembered that Kirino... that my own little sister wasn't here anymore, they were worried that I would be lonely. So, they came over, and my mother let them up into my room.

Hmm... but their worries were seriously misplaced.

I was pretty relieved that my annoying little sister was gone.

But I really, honestly appreciated how they worried about me, so I was really happy.

Nodding with satisfaction, I saw Kuroneko give me a displeased scowl.

"And this one over here is just making up his own mind by himself... I give up."

Kuroneko sat up in bed, and buried her head into her knees.

On the other hand, Saori was busily working on the floor, and picked up the vivid red plastic model she was working on. She closed one eye and seemed to be inspecting it, until finally, she blew lightly on her handiwork.

“Well, I guess that’s fine for now.”

Saori stood the plastic model right-side up on the floor, her mouth curling up into a ω shape, and she gave me a cheerful smile.

“Kyouusuke-shi, even if Kiririn-shi is gone, that doesn’t mean our friendship has changed at all. Isn’t that right?”

“... Hah.”

Feeling completely lured in, I broke into laughter.

“Yeah. You’re completely right.”

I didn’t even have to say it.

I really, really loved these two.

Part 4

And that's how, just after the new semester started, I found myself with two high school girls in my room.

From an objective standpoint, you might think this was a pretty envious position to be in. But in reality, with Saori looking like the way she did, and with Kuroneko doing nothing but spitting out insults, it wasn't like this situation was going to go down any romantic paths.

But now that Kirino was gone, from here on out I would probably have more and more opportunities to hang out with these two like this. That wasn't bad at all.

I straddled my chair backwards and looked back and forth between Saori, who was still sitting cross-legged on the floor staring at her plastic model, and Kuroneko, who was hugging her knees on the bed. I was thinking about what to do next.

It was at that point when I suddenly realized that Kuroneko was staring at my crotch.

"Kuroneko... where exactly are you looking?"

"Over there."

Kuroneko pointed between my legs, at a spot under the table.

I stood up to take a look at the place in question, and I saw an eroge box under there.

“Sister x Sister Siscon Love Story~.” A title that should never be found in the room of a guy who actually had a little sister.

“That name rings a bell.”

“Ahh... this? Uh, first off, let me just say: I didn’t buy this. Kirino was the one who gave it to me... you remember, right? It was that time you wore a maid outfit to cheer me up...”

“Ahhh, so this was the present she gave you back then. Hahaha, that sure brings back memories.”

Saori burst into shrill laughter.

“... Did you beat it?”

“Ahh, no, I haven’t played it at all. Kirino took her laptop over to America with her... and it’s not like I can just use her desktop whenever I felt like it.”

Yes, I hadn’t played eroge even once since then. I wasn’t even an otaku to begin with. I had considered trying it since it was given to me as a present, but until I got a new computer for myself, I just couldn’t motivate myself to play it.

“Well, if that’s how it is, then just leave it to me! If you’re fine with something a bit older, then I can give you a computer.”

“Ahh, no, it’s fine. I don’t really use computers that much.”

“Fufufu, you don’t have to say that, Kyouusuke-shi. Just say thank you and accept it. Getting rid of a computer takes quite a bit of time anyways. So if you take it off my hands I’d be pretty grateful.”

“R-Really? Well, then, I’ll take you up on that offer... I’ll take the computer.”

“Alright then! I’ll send that to you later on, so next time let’s set it up together.”

“Ah, thanks.”

I thanked Saori, and stared at the eroge box I had gotten from Kirino. A smile crept naturally onto my face.

It seemed like the otaku in me hadn’t vanished just yet.

“Although... that bastard, she left without even telling you guys...”

“Hmph, you could figure it out pretty easily by just reading her SNS profile updates... but that was it. Even after she left, I never heard from her.”

“Me neither.”

Saori agreed with Kuroneko and nodded.

“So... what are you saying? She never tried to contact either of you even once after that?”

“Yes.” “Precisely.”

Huh? What the hell did that girl think she was doing?

“Huh..... So it’s like that.....”

Hmm... granted, I had a bit of a feeling that things were like this...

I mean, that girl didn’t even say anything to Ayase before she went off.

She honestly didn’t tell anybody besides our parents before she went abroad.

And then after that, she ceased all contact with everyone over here.

To be quite honest, I had no idea what my sister was thinking.

I let out a long, deep sigh.

“Geez, what a heartless thing to do... I know it doesn’t mean much coming from me, but I apologize. Sorry, and to think you guys have been such a help to her so far...”

“... It’s not like I really mind. Hmph, this is exactly what I’d expect from a friend I made online. I was getting tired of that girl anyways, so it’s actually pretty convenient that she decided to leave.”

It was a pretty sad sight to see Kuroneko sulking like that.

She was acting like a guy who had just gotten dumped by his girlfriend.

On the other hand, Saori’s attitude was the complete opposite.

“If I may be allowed to speak freely... I’m fairly angry about it.”

Saori frowned and crossed her arms. It was a pose you would expect from Kirino.

“R-Really?”

I was incredibly surprised. This was the first time I had seen Saori being angry. It might sound silly, but up until now I had been under the illusion that the only two human emotions Saori possessed were happiness and joy. I could only really remember seeing her laughing gleefully, to the point where that had seemed completely plausible to me...

Saori spoke in a tone slightly different from what I was used to.

“Of course, I do admire Kiririn-shi’s ambition, and I fully acknowledge that there are opportunities for her overseas. Also, this is not that unusual of a situation. I have friends at school who did something similar, and went somewhere far abroad to study, so I understand. However... no, I guess I should say, for that very reason... even if I can understand the logic of it, no matter how hard I try I can’t understand the feelings behind it.”

Saori cleared her throat.

“I... I thought of Kiririn-shi as a friend, and I believed that Kiririn-shi felt the same way about me. So, the fact that she didn’t discuss her plans with us at all before leaving frustrates me, makes me sad... but most of all, having a new friend not be here anymore is difficult to deal with. I feel lonely when I think about the possibility that we won’t be able to enjoy each other’s company anymore... and I don’t know what to do.”

“Saori.....”

“And then, I don’t get calls or emails from her anymore, her blog hasn’t been updated in a long time, she no longer signs onto twitter or IM... I’m just getting more and more annoyed... everyone ends up disappearing at some point or another, so doesn’t she know that I’d definitely forgive her for that?”

“.....”

I was at a loss for words. To think that she thought of Kirino like that... I see. She had thought Kirino had finally warmed up to her and opened her heart to her, but Kirino ended up leaving without a word. She probably felt betrayed.

I didn't think Saori was being narrow-minded.

Rather, she truly felt close to Kirino, and so she could also feel resentment towards her too.

I don't know how to put it, but she was a human being with human emotions, and most of all, she was a girl.

This all just made me renew my affection for Kuroneko and Saori.

"Alright."

I clapped my hands.

"Then, let's just not think about that idiot today and just hang out. And you two, write what you feel on your SNS blogs. I'm sure that if Kirino reads them later, she'll feel bad about it."

"..... Hm, that is a good idea."

"Roger that. Well then, what should we do now...?"

I saw a bit of cheer seep back into their faces.

My, my. Even putting me aside for a second, what was my sister thinking when she decided to abandon such good friends as these? Was there really a good reason for her to stop all contact with the people that she knew here?

Inwardly, I let out a deep, deep, deep sigh.

Part 5

And well, that's how my days have been going more or less.

I had otaku friends, I had erogé in my room, and my little sister was gone.

It was nothing like how I was living a year ago, but it also wasn't a bad way to live.

At some point, things which I had once considered highly unusual were now natural parts of my daily routine.

This was, in its own way, the extremely normal, peaceful life I had always wanted.

And so...

I had gained a new kouhai, gotten a year older, and was seeing another spring...

And the new scenery I now found before me would eventually become a natural element in my life. And later... as that went on, I was sure that I would have just as much fun as I'd been having up until now... or possibly, even more fun.

"Hah. Take that, world."

I spat that out at nobody in particular.

Part 6

It was the second day of the new semester. The bell signaling the end of the day chimed, and the classroom stirred to life.

At that moment, Manami ran lightly up to me as she usually did.

“Kyou-chan, let’s go home?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Fortunately, Manami and I had been put in the same class again this year. Granted, even if we had been in different classes, the only difference would be that the time between homeroom ending and when we had this conversation would have been slightly prolonged.

I had gone up a grade, and my class had changed, so most of the faces around me were unfamiliar, but what was strange was how, because Manami was still there, I didn’t really feel that anything major had changed.

“Hmm, it really feels like the same old thing...”

“Hm? What does?”

“Nothing at all.”

I swung my schoolbag over my back and stood up. But just as I was about to exit into the hallway, I spoke up.

“Hey Manami, there’s somewhere I want to drop by first...”

“That’s fine. Where?”

“The first year classrooms.”

“Ahh, to where Kuroneko-san is, perhaps?”

“Yeah, I told you I would introduce you, right? Let’s go.”

“Alright.”

I began to walk briskly down the hallway, with Manami pitter-pattering behind me.

The day was no different from any other day. We went down the stairs and headed for the first-year’s rooms.

“By the way, Kyou-chan.”

After we had walked for just a little while, Manami brought up a rather unpleasant topic.

“So you still can’t get in touch with Kirino-chan?”

“Nah. But it’s not like I care. It’s just because her friends are starting to worry. Last night, I tried to reach her by phone, but as I expected, she didn’t pick up. I sent her an email too, but I haven’t gotten a response yet.”

It was a rather obvious outcome. After all, if she wasn’t responding to Saori or Kuroneko’s messages, then there’s no reason she would respond to mine. What in the world did that idiot think she was doing?

Manami hung her head upon hearing my words.

“... I see. You must be lonely.”

“Huh? Not really.”

“... Come on, Kyou-chan. You’re not being honest. You were planning on trying to call her pretty often, weren’t you?”

“As if. Who the hell would want to talk to her that much?”

I spat that out and started to walk more quickly.

And it was right then.

I caught sight of the back of a female student in the first-year's hallway, quickly walking towards the stairs.

"Ah... Kyou-chan, that's..."

"Yeah."

I chased after the girl who was heading down the stairs. I left the slower Manami behind as I broke out into a run, and caught up with her near the shoe racks¹. And as the girl began to change her shoes, I called out to her.

"Hey hey, why are you about to leave?"

"....."

With her street shoes in one hand, she... that is, Kuroneko... turned this way.

She looked even more emotionless than usual. I couldn't even tell what she was thinking right then.

Although I was a bit frightened by the dark aura she was giving off, I still asked her the question that naturally sprung to my head.

¹ Which, if you've ever seen the stereotypical layout of Japanese high schools, are near the front door.

“You got my email, right? That I would be coming over after homeroom was over and that you should wait for me in your room.”

Kuroneko’s response was curt.

“Oh, is that so? I don’t remember.”

“..... H-Hey, you.....”

W-What the hell? And I thought... yesterday especially, I thought that we’d been getting along pretty well.

Was it just me, or was she really cold at school?

At that point, Manami caught up to us.

..... *Pant..... pant.....* “Kyou-chan, wait for me~~.....”

Manami panted as her shoulders heaved up and down, and when she raised her head, she seemed to sense the rather strange atmosphere that was permeating the space around me and Kuroneko.

“..... Wha-? What’s wrong?”

.....

The silence stretched on for a few seconds. During those few seconds, Kuroneko's gaze darted back and forth between Manami and me.

At last, she spoke hesitantly.

"..... Senpai, who's this?"

"A-Ahh. To be honest, this is someone I wanted to introduce to you."

"I'm Tamura Manami. Nice to meet you... umm, Kuroneko-san. Or maybe, would you prefer it if I called you Gokou-san?"

Manami introduced herself in the friendliest way imaginable. And then she gave Kuroneko a warm smile.

In response, a terrified expression leapt onto Kuroneko's face, as if she were staring at the devil himself.

"Ah, and so she's finally appeared... Belphegor..."

"Huh??? Belfeh..."

Of course, there was no reason Manami would know what Kuroneko was talking about, and my bespectacled childhood friend turned and looked behind her.

Sorry, Manami.

Unfortunately, Belphegor-san isn't standing behind you.

The Belphegor that Kuroneko had mentioned was a character that had appeared in a manga she had drawn. Belphegor was the true demonic form of Manami, a character based off the real-life Manami.²

It was just a huge jumbled mess.

And, speaking of the manga Kuroneko drew...

It was strange how Kuroneko had managed to pin down Manami's personality, considering they had never met in real life before.

I really should have asked her about that... but whatever, that's not important right now. I have to deal with the present situation.

"Hey, Kuroneko, get a hold of yourself. Come back to Earth. This isn't the world you created for that manga, remember?"

² I probably mentioned this in a footnote in the previous volume, but the "Manami" in the manga is written in all katakana, while the "Manami" in real life is written with the appropriate kanji. It makes them easy to separate in the Japanese, but a bit more difficult should everything be translated to English.

“..... I know that.”

She said that as if it were obvious, but when it came to this girl, I was still suspicious of whether she really did know that or not.



Once before, Kirino had talked all about how Kuroneko was jakigan, how she was chuunibyou,³ how all her characters were Mary Sues... but in general, she was the type of person who tended to get way too involved with the settings she created.

Don't get 2D confused with 3D, geez.

That was what my sister had said. My sister was fully aware of the differences between 2D and 3D, and what's more, she could love each of them separately. On the other hand, Kuroneko sometimes wasn't able to fully define where one ended and the other began.

That's probably why she would sometimes act as though whatever happened in some anime was actually happening in the real world. I didn't think that was necessarily a bad thing... but it could be dangerous sometimes, so it made me worry.

Kuroneko looked back and forth between Manami and me.

Manami gave Kuroneko another smile. Seeming to have recollected herself, she tried once again.

"Hello, I'm Tamura Manami."

³ Both are derogatory terms for someone who is way too into overpowered characters and fantasy settings.

At that, Kuroneko finally seemed to ready herself, and she gave a reluctant bow.

“..... Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

Manami returned the bow.

And she gave Kuroneko a smile, almost as if she had already forgotten all about Kuroneko’s weird behavior at the beginning.

The rather strange atmosphere broke, and a feeling of calm spread through the air.

When that happened, Kuroneko did something unexpected.

“Well then, I’m going to go...”

“Wait wait wait wait.... Kouhai, why are you still trying to head home as if nothing happened?”

I grabbed hold of Kuroneko’s collar from the back as she tried to run off.

“..... I apologize, senpai. Unfortunately, I have to go to work today, so I can’t stay.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that you would never go into work on Thursdays?”

“..... Maschera is on television today, so I have to get back quickly.”

“Maschera already ended with the twelfth episode of the second season, and they aren’t going to be airing anymore, right?”

“Don’t say it as if they’ve cancelled it or something, dammit!!”

“Uwaah?!”

Why the hell was she getting pissed there?! Also, her tone and way of speaking just changed, didn’t they?! Who the hell was this person?!

This must’ve been the first time I’ve seen an exclamation mark at the end of anything she’s said!

In any case, it seemed that I had just incurred her divine wrath. Terrifying.

“S-Sorry. I meant, the sequel to Maschera just hasn’t been made yet. Alright?”

“..... As long as you know that. Just remember, there isn’t a single fan who’s given up on it yet.”

I see.

Well then, why in the world was she lying to us just so she could go home? She still hasn’t given us a reason.

It’s not like I was going to forcibly restrain her, but now I was curious.

Manami seemed deeply interested in this cute kouhai, and she took that opportunity to speak up.

“Umm, should I call you Kuroneko-san then?”

“..... Do what you wish.”

“Okay. Then, Kuroneko-san... how’s school? Are you still nervous?”

“..... I’m fine.”

“I see. Do you live near here?”

“I see no reason to tell you that.”

The conversation was just not getting anywhere.

In one corner, you had Manami, who was going to cheerfully try to strike up a conversation no matter how coldly she was treated. In the other corner, you had Kuroneko, who was going to just cut down any attempts at conversation no matter how friendly the other person was being.

I was feeling a strange sense of déjà vu.

Certainly... I remember something like this... also happening before...

Ah... now I remember.

“..... Hey, Kuroneko... hey, I need to borrow you for a second.”

“...? What do you want...?”

As Kuroneko reluctantly came closer, I put my mouth close to her ear.

I gave a quick glance at Manami, who was standing off to the side and staring at us blankly.

“Umm, could it be... I don’t know if it’s true, but... do you hate Manami?”

“..... Not really.”

She gave the same exact response that Kirino had given.

So what the hell was going on then? Why did it seem like you two were just so incompatible with each other?

This was the first time you two were meeting each other, right? So why did it seem like your relationship was starting off from something less than zero?

“..... Haha, so, was it Kirino then? Kirino told you something didn’t she. Something about Manami. That’s why Manami showed up in your manga too.”

Kuroneko just responded with a “hmph.” Well, she didn’t deny it.

So I’ll just take that as agreement.

“... You know... I already know just how much you care about Kirino. But don’t swallow every story she feeds you. You’re meeting her in person now, so you should judge her with your own eyes.”

“..... Didn’t I already tell you that I don’t really hate her?”

Kuroneko grumbled quietly. But it didn’t seem to me that she was speaking completely honest.

It really seemed I had hit the nail on the head. That is, she had been fooled by some story that Kirino had fed her, and so when I had told her that I wanted to introduce her to Manami, she immediately tried to run away.

Still, it just didn't make sense.

No matter what Kirino might have told Kuroneko, when Kuroneko saw just how friendly of a person Manami was, she should have realized that everything Kirino told her had been a lie.

So why was she still intent on walling herself off to Manami?

To me, Manami was a childhood friend who had been with me for a long time.

And Kuroneko was a very important friend to me, and a very, very cute kouhai.

And all three of us were finally going to the same school.

If possible, I wanted these two to get along as well...

Of course, those were my own selfish hopes, and I couldn't force them to do anything.

"..... Alright, fine."

“Eh?”

Kurneko shrugged.

“I said fine... senpai. You want me to stay here for something, right? I’m not happy about it at all, but... I’ll play along with whatever you want. Just stop looking so pitiful. Looking at that is just making me depressed.”

Looking so pitiful?

This girl was seriously every bit as relentlessly foulmouthed as Kirino.

But, what she just said... it was pretty hard to understand, but... it was a response to when I told her to judge Manami with her own eyes, right?

And from what I could tell, she was being considerate of my feelings when she saw that I was feeling bad.

This girl was seriously every bit as softhearted as Manami.

“And if I just stay here and argue with you, I’ll just end up wasting a lot of time. So if you need me for something, let’s just get it over with quickly.”

“Ah, well, I’ve already done half of what I came here to do. I just wanted to introduce you to Manami. Umm... yeah, and then...”

Let's all go home together. That's what I was just on the verge of saying, when I heard someone call Kuroneko from the stairs.

"Gokou-san~~."

A group of first-year girls came pitter-pattering down the stairs (I could tell their year from the color of their school shoes).

They were most likely Kuroneko's classmates. One of them spoke up in a cheerful tone.

"Are you free right now? Everyone's planning to go for some karaoke, so if you want..."

"..... I'm not free."

Instant response. Kuroneko cut down the proposal with a single emotionless stroke. This wasn't good. That wasn't an attitude to take towards classmates you had just met. Even if you really were busy.

Manami came right to the rescue. She turned to the first-years, clasped her hands together in front of her, and shut one eye.

"Sorry~~, I invited her to come with us first."

"Umm, senpai did that?"

“Yeah. So, maybe next time... okay?”

“Alright, understood. There’s no use arguing if it’s like that. Well, Gokou-san, see you tomorrow at school, alright?”

“.....”

Her classmates waved and went off, but Kuroneko just silently watched them leave.

Manami faced her not-so-friendly kouhai and gave her a slightly awkward smile.

“..... Was I..... out of line there?”

“.....”

Kuroneko remained absolutely silent, but just looked back and forth between Manami and me. After a few moments, she shook her head. It was just her incredibly roundabout way of saying thanks. I thought I would translate that for Manami, but...

“I see. Well then, I’m glad.”

It seemed a translation wasn’t necessary. Manami was honestly a kind-hearted person to her core.

And then, because I was stalling for so long, Manami even stole the words I had been meaning to say all along.

“W-Well then, do you want to walk home with us?”

“..... Whatever. Do what you want.”

Having finished changing into her street shoes, Kuroneko began to walk out alone.

And that was what had happened during Manami and Kuroneko’s first meeting.

I think it definitely could have been worse.

Part 7

So, for that reason, the three of us ended up leaving school together. Kuroneko was still acting incredibly stiff towards Manami. Seeming to sense that, Manami didn't try to force a conversation, but rather seemed to be determined to improve her relationship with Kuroneko a bit at a time. Kuroneko ended up walking home between Manami and myself.

..... But seriously, considering what Kuroneko's personality was like, was she really going to be able to get along with her classmates?

From what I had seen just a little while ago, it was doubtful. Her classmates seemed to still be friendly with her, but if she continued to act that way, sooner or later they would begin to avoid her.

When we exited the school building, I was treated to an unfamiliar sight. In the corners of the space between the school building and the main gates, there were groupings of two or three desks spotting the grounds.

"What's that?"

"They're club recruitment tables. Come on, this happened last year too, remember?"

"Ahh, so it's already that time again."

When the first semester started at this school, all the first-year students attended an assembly in the gym, during which they were told about all the clubs at the school.

And the day after that assembly, all the clubs began to try and recruit new members.

School had just ended a minute ago, so I still couldn't see many students around.

It would still be a bit of time before the club recruiters started going at it in full force.

As we walked by the tables nearest us, I took a glance and saw that they were occupied by the Literary Club.

They had two tables placed side by side, and there was a paper sign with "Literary Club" written on it in magic marker hanging down in front of the tables.

And they also had handmade pamphlets placed on top of the table.

"Hmmm..."

I was suddenly reminded of the booths in the doujinshi market at Comiket. Geez, those otaku were really having a bad influence on me...

“Umm, won’t you consider joining the Literary Club?”

“Sorry, I’m a third year,” I responded, moving on quickly.

Looking at the other tables in front of me, I saw there were other clubs that were trying to do the same thing the Literary Club was trying to do. All the clubs were trying their hardest to recruit some promising first-years. Granted, Manami and I had never joined any clubs, so all this had nothing to do with us.

“By the way, Kuroneko, are you going to join a club?”

“..... No. I have a lot of other things I need to do.....”

“Ah, yeah, you also have a part-time job, right?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Ohhhh..... what kind of part-time job do you have?”

When Manami came in on the conversation, Kuroneko suddenly turned the other way.

“..... Why does it matter what it is?”

“A-Ahh...”

Faced with Kuroneko’s cold response, Manami managed to respond with a smile, but then seemed close to tears as she looked at me. I could almost hear her voice in my head going “Kyou-chan, what do I do~~~?”

I loved seeing this flustered side of my childhood friend, and usually in this situation I would tease her a bit, but because Kuroneko was here right now, I restrained myself.

I shrugged, trying to tell her to calm down, and that the only way to get close to Kuroneko was to take it one step at a time.

“... Alright.”

Manami gave me a deep nod.

It was a method of communication that only worked between friends who had been together for as long as we had been. At that point, a new person entered the scene.

“Yo, Tamura-san, Kousaka, you headed home?”

“Akagi.” “Akagi-kun.”

We turned around to face the person who had called out. And we saw member of the soccer club standing there, wearing a soccer vest.

His name was Akagi Kouhei. He was also my class.

“Yeah, we’re just about to head home~~.”

“Ah, I see.”

Akagi faced Manami and gave her a bright smile. He was as good-looking as ever. Tch, that annoyed me to no end.

I was almost tempted to just let out what I knew about that time I caught him buying homo games, but considering we had a pact that we would never tell anybody about how we were buying eroge, I stopped myself.

Instead, I butted in forcibly when I saw that Akagi was about to start talking to Manami.

“Wait, so did club activities already start for you?”

“Ahh, I guess. Gotta recruit members.”

Ah, right. He was also part of the group that was recruiting first-years. For the soccer club. Well, hurry up and go about your business then.

“Uh-huh. So, how’s that going then?”

“Not that great... ah, who’s this?”

Akagi noticed Kuroneko, and seemed a bit surprised. It was probably because he wasn’t used to seeing someone else mixed in with Manami and myself.

In response, Kuroneko took a quick glance up at Akagi’s face, but she didn’t seem interested in talking, so she quickly turned away. It was similar to how she was acting towards Manami.

..... It really might be the case that she was just really shy with strangers. During their first offline meeting, I remembered that she and Kirino ended up being isolated from the crowd. It took her a while to warm up to myself and Saori as well.

If that were the case, I really might have misunderstood when I thought she hated Manami.

“It’s a new student. I actually know her from before, so we were about to walk home together.”

Kuroneko didn’t seem like she was going to answer anytime soon, so I answered for her.

At that, Akagi gave me a suggestive look.

“Ohhh? Know her from before? I wonder how you know her from before...”

He gave Kuroneko a single glance before turning back to Manami... what the hell are you trying to imply, you bastard?

Manami also didn't seem to know what was going on, and she cocked her head lightly to the side.

“Hm? What's wrong, Akagi-kun?”

“Ahh, no, it's nothing, Tamura-san. I was just thinking about how sly this Kousaka guy over here is, to have two cute girls following him around.”

“Ugh, what the hell are you saying...”

Completely dumbfounded, I couldn't even bring myself to sigh, but the simple-minded Manami seemed to be pleased with what was obvious flattery. She put a hand on her cheek and blushed.

“Oooo, Akagi-kun, you... hey, Kyou-chan, did you hear that? He said that you're being sly by having two cute girls following you around~. H-He's including me in that, right?”

“Hmph, whatever.”

I snorted. My mouth warped into a sour expression, and I gave Akagi a sharp glare.

“Hey, you, Mr. Soccer Club Representative, don’t slack off. Get back to recruiting those first-years. If you keep on dozing off like this, I might accidentally spill the title of that game you bought.”

“Wow, you’re pretty quick with that temper of yours... you’re pretty easy to read, you know.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

I said that with quite a bit of anger in my voice... but contrary to my expectations, Akagi seemed to ignore it.

“Nothing, nothing. Also, Kousaka, I’m not slacking off. I got permission from the club president before I came over. I promised my little sister I would meet up with her.”

“Little sister?”

“Yes, little sister. You see her around here somewhere? My little sister, that is. She’s a new student.”

“Are you an idiot? How do you expect me to know what your little sister looks like?”

It was the natural response, but then Akagi said something quite astonishing.

“It’s alright, she’s the cutest person in the world, so you’ll know her when you see her.”

“

I was incredibly put off.

T-This guy is seriously a huge idiot of an older brother...! He looks like he’s being serious too...!

To be honest, I had an inkling that something like this was going on ever since I had met him during that late-night sale in Akihabara.

After all, his sister might have asked him to do it, but this guy still went out of his way to line up in the middle of the night in Akihabara to buy homo games. Hell, he was even the only guy in the line he was standing in.

That just wasn’t normal. There was definitely something wrong there.

Granted, I shouldn’t be talking here! I was the one who went to Akihabara to buy two little sister eroge because my little sister had asked me to, and then ended up pedaling home like crazy for thirty-two kilometers on a bike with a huge anime character painted on it!

From an objective point of view, if you asked yourself who was being stranger here..... was it me?

W-Well well, let's forget about me for a second.

Come on, Akagi is seriously a hentai! He's just crazy!

"So Akagi-kun's little sister is really that cute~~~?"

"I guess. She's pretty slender and she wears glasses. She sort of looks like Tamura-san, actually."

She looked like Manami, and she was still the cutest girl in the world?

Akagi, exactly what kind of warped sense of beauty do you have?

Could you please tell me what part of Manami comes off as "slender" to you?

Geez, being a siscon was really a serious disease...

What an embarrassing guy. There was nothing more disgusting than having a real little sister and still liking little sisters.

I just couldn't believe it. I could feel my entire body itching, and I just couldn't stand talking about this anymore.

Also, Kuroneko had started briskly walking away, so I had to hurry up and catch up to her.

“In any case, I haven’t seen someone as pretty as that. See ya later.”

“Ah, h-hey...”

I gave Akagi a light wave and turned heel. I didn’t pay Akagi any more attention as I chased after Kuroneko.

Keh.

If we’re only talking about physical appearance, then my little sister is much cuter than yours.

Part 8

Manami and I chased after Kuroneko together.

And then, we saw Kuroneko suddenly stop in her tracks.

I caught up to Kuroneko, and spoke up to her right when I was by her side.

“Sorry. Were you waiting for us?”

“.....”

No response.

This was what I was talking about... this was seriously, seriously weird... I thought we were getting along pretty well too as of late...

Why was it that if I met her at school, she would behave the same way I remember her behaving the first time we met?

So? Why exactly did she stop then? It looks like she’s looking at something...

I traced her line of sight to where she was looking, and saw the recruitment table for the Game Research Society.

“The Game Research Society, huh?”

So there was a club for that too...

I see. Kuroneko liked games, so her interest was drawn to that club.

The Game Research Society had six tables put together, and on top of the tables they had placed three laptops. There was a game running on each laptop, and it seemed that any passerby could play those games freely.

It was a way to attract newcomers. It was like how the soccer club was juggling soccer balls, or the wind ensemble was putting on a musical performance.

“If you would like, feel free to play a game.”

One of the male recruitment members of the Game Research Society called out to us, probably because we were staring at their tables. He had black hair and a young-looking face... I didn't recognize him, so he was probably a second year.

When I looked down at the display, I saw that a demo movie of a shooting game was playing.

It looked like a vertical scrolling shooter (even I knew enough about games to know lingo like that). The characters you played were girls, and every once in a while the action broke and there was an event where the characters talked to each other.

“This game... did the club make this game?”

“Yes.”

As I thought. After all, the characters were drawn too poorly for this to be actually sold on the market.

“So you have a doujin game here...”

“Yup. This club’s primary activity is making these types of games and then participating in events. I guess it might look like we’re just spending our budget on fun and games, but I mean, this is also just another way to contribute to the modern culture.”

He gave me a mischievous chuckle.

“Putting games on the table like this attracts people, and I get the feeling that if they play these games, they’ll start to understand more about us.”

He explained the situation to me good-naturedly.

By the way, I feel like the minute I mentioned the words “doujin game,” this club member began to take to me instantly. He probably thought that we had a common interest here... well, it’s not like he was too far off the mark.

“... Hmph, this is a bullet hell game, isn’t it? If you ask me, the difficulty level is a bit too high to attract people.”

I suddenly noticed that Kuroneko was staring at the display from a very close distance away.

Kuroneko was an amazing gamer, and I remember that she had said something about wanting to make a doujin game too.

“Ah, nice catch. Well, to be honest, that’s a game our president made to test newcomers. The president said that there’s no need to let people join the club if they can’t even clear that game. But to be honest, I don’t think that’s something you should say. It’s not like there are that many core gamers here at school, so if you’re picky about it you won’t be able to get many people to join the club.”

The club member scratched his head and gave me an awkward laugh.

“So the demo movie might seem incredibly difficult, but there’s also an easy mode, so please try it on that.”

“... Ah, no, that’s...”

The club member offered a controller to Kuroneko, but she didn't move to take it.

She looked at the school building, and then at the school gate, and then at the controller... she seemed completely lost.

Hm? I could have sworn she had said that she wanted to get back home quickly...

While I sunk into puzzled thought, Manami urged Kuroneko on.

"Kuroneko-san, we're already here, so why not try?"

"..... But....."

Kuroneko watched the game display with a sour look on her face. She really seemed to be incredibly interested in trying the game. It was a look of longing, reminiscent of a child who wanted to play the goldfish game at a festival but didn't have enough money.

And given that her attention was elsewhere, she even managed to respond to Manami in a sincere, normal way.

But it seemed that she really did want to get back quickly. It seemed that she really had some plans outside of her part-time job. So that's why she was at a loss for what to do. Geez, what a troublesome person.

“Can’t you just beat it really quickly? Considering it’s you we’re talking about, you can demolish that game in no time at all, right?”

When I goaded her on a bit, Kuroneko seemed to finally steel her resolve.

“... Well, I guess there’s no helping it then.”

She gave a nod, took the controller, and sat herself down in front of the screen.

The Game Research Society Entrance Test Bullet Hell STG: Divine Vengeance of Angry Righteousness, Megidoraon.¹

“..... That’s quite an incredible name you have there.”

“..... I’m so sorry.”

The club member looked ashamed. It seemed that this incredible naming was the work of the club president alone.

“Alright..... I’m starting.”

¹ The game is pronounced Megidoraon, but is a title comprised of five kanji, which mean “destruction,” “justice,” “anger,” “God,” and “resentment.” I tried my best >_>.

Kuroneko had to choose her difficulty.

Of course, she didn't choose Easy Mode, but went with the very difficult Hard Mode instead.

"Ahh... are you sure? That's really, really difficult, you know?"

"I'll be fine."

Kuroneko briskly responded and started the game.

Well then, it'll probably take Kuroneko a bit of time to finish the game. So I'll kill some time chatting with Manami over here.

"Kyou-chan, is Kuroneko-san really good at games?"

"Really, really good. Well, just watch... she'll probably clear the entire thing."

"Ah, no, I don't think that will happen... to be honest, the person who made this game couldn't even clear it on this difficulty."

Wait a second...

What the hell do you mean? Even though this game was being used as an entrance test, the president who made it couldn't even clear it?

That was just a failure, in every sense of the word.

“Hey... if that’s true, isn’t this a pretty shitty game?”

“Hahaha... umm, senpai, it’s not good to just label every game that’s difficult as a shitty game, you know. If you play enough and become good enough, even games like *Mystery of Convoy* and *Spelunker*² become playable... what the hell?! She already cleared the first stage?!”

On the display, I could see a huge enemy exploding with a thunderous boom while being engulfed in flames. It seemed that Kuroneko had cleared the first stage in the short amount of time I had been looking away.

“If you just stick to him and keep on firing at him from close range, this is what you get. It’s nothing to be surprised about.”

Kuroneko briskly responded.

“..... Also, I agree that a game being difficult doesn’t make it bad. However, this game is difficult *to the point of being annoying*, so it is a genuinely horrible game. In good games with a high degree of difficulty, sometimes death can motivate the player. Games like *Wizardry* or *Demon Souls*, for example. On the other hand... after playing a terrible bullet hell game like this, which just oozes with the bad personality of its maker, all I can get from it is a sense of irrational annoyance and discomfort.”

² References to *The Transformers: Mystery of Convoy* and *Spelunkers*, both games which are known to be difficult.

And yet, even though she said that, she hadn't lost a single life yet. I would expect no less.

"Y-Yeah, I know... I mean, you have those low-speed homing bullets that stay with you until the end of the level even if you shoot them with a bomb, and stages where your character's speed triples but the controls are inverted... it doesn't do anything but piss the player off. I already told the president that this isn't a Famicom game, so it wasn't necessary to program in these crazy game mechanics... hey, but you're getting through it pretty well. You've barely died."

The club member also seemed to be surprised by how good Kuroneko was at the game.

A few minutes passed, and I slowly became tired of waiting.

After watching Kuroneko play, the club member sighed and seemed impressed.

Sigh..... "Although, you know, there are some really amazing first-years who have been coming to this booth..."

"So, you mean you saw someone else who was good at games?"

"Yeah, to tell you the truth, there was another girl who came by earlier, who also cleared hard mode without a sweat."

“And she joined the club?”

“Yeah, somehow we managed to convince her to join.”

Hmm. So there was even another amazing gamer here... and she was a first-year like Kuroneko?

“A fellow gamer... I wonder if you’d get along with her.”

“Oh yes, I wonder.”

Kuroneko responded, sounding somewhat annoyed. She really seemed to be in a bad mood today.

Right then, Kuroneko set the controller back on the table with a clatter.

“I cleared the last stage.”

“No way!!”

The club member stood up in shock.

I understood that the difficulty was so high that it might warrant a reaction like that. But...

“Aren’t you a bit too surprised? Wasn’t there someone else who cleared hard mode too?”

“I-I mean... that’s true, but...”

“But what?”

The club member’s jaw dropped in amazement, and he slowly muttered his response.

“That’s... well, she got a high score. The old high score was completely broken just a while ago too...”

“And that’s something impressive?”

“It’s way more than just impressive! Hey, umm, you...”

Even while completely shaken, the club member began to reach out towards Kuroneko.

But Kuroneko lightly dodged his hand.

“Hmph. From start to end, that was just a crap game through and through. Please go tell whoever made the game to die.”

Spitting out that harsh insult, Kuroneko twisted around and looked up at me.

“..... Well, shall we hurry back?”

“Y-Yeah. Alright, let’s go, Manami.”

“Okay.”

“Well, that’s how it is. Sorry.”

Leaving that message with the club member who still had his hand outstretched, I began to leave that place behind with Manami and Kuroneko.

“Umm... well, I’ll try to find you some other day then.”

We heard that from behind us.

It seemed that the Game Research Society hadn’t given up on getting Kuroneko to join.

But Kuroneko didn’t turn back, and just continued to walk away.

“

Feeling an odd sensation in the face of Kuroneko's stubbornness, I began to walk and chased after her.

Part 9

And thus began my new life without Kirino.

It was a peaceful life, albeit a slightly boring one.

However...

Even without my sister here, the flames of turmoil were already beginning to sputter to life.

Sputter to life all around me.

END CHAPTER 1



Part 1

Well, how time flies. Before I knew it, it was May. And my situation hadn't really changed. More precisely, nothing worth mentioning had happened.

Some days I studied for my exams in my room, while other days I went to Manami's house and helped with the shop.

And some other days, I hung out and chatted with Manami and Kuroneko, while on still other days I got help with schoolwork from Manami at the library. And just the other day, I spent a day with Saori setting up the computer I had gotten from her.

And Of course, I no longer heard annoying chatter coming from the room next door, I didn't have to worry about being forced to play eroge anymore, and I was no longer dragged along to events.

These were perfectly normal, peaceful days.

However, they weren't the same days as before, when I could just spend all day looking up at the clouds thinking about how nice life was.

I mean, Kirino still had not contacted us, and I was getting really worried for Kuroneko and Saori.

Well, whatever. I didn't care about that.

There was one other thing that was a bit on my mind... or rather, I should say that I just had no idea what to do about it...

And that was...

Siiiiiiiiiiiiighhhhhh.

I propped up my chin with my hands on my desk, and let out a huge sigh. I was just way too fed up with the lecture to listen.

We were in the middle of class. The world history teacher was writing on the blackboard with a ferocity that rapidly filled the entire board with chalk, so everyone was desperately trying to take notes. My arms were already so damn tired.

Alright... I think I'll take a little break and rest my eyes for a bit.

Quite a few people had basically reached the same point that I had, and every single boy with a window seat was gazing out the window, down into the schoolyard.

The first-year girls were in the middle of PE class. I think any boy who's been through junior high school knows this already, but if you let your attention drift in a situation like this, an entire hour could fly by in a single minute, so a bit of care was necessary.

Although, what I was looking at weren't the PE uniforms of the numerous girls below.

Rather, what I was staring intently at was Kuroneko in her PE uniform doing calisthenics, with her belly button flickering in and out of visibility. People might misinterpret that, so let me just clarify that I wasn't looking at her with only wicked intentions.

The first years had grouped into pairs and were doing their warm-up exercises, but one girl didn't have a partner, and was doing her exercises with the teacher instead.

"..... What the hell....."

Who, you ask? Kuroneko, of course.

Unlike the other students who were chatting with their partners as they exercised, Kuroneko was just going through her exercises with her usual indifferent, emotionless expression. I watched her from the window.

"..... Ugh..... whaaaaaaat the hell does that idiot think she's doing...??"

Annoyance rushed to my head, and I felt pangs in my chest.

Not even her pale thighs, so pale that I wondered if they just refused to absorb sunlight, were enough to lighten my mood.

And this wasn't an isolated incident.

When I saw her walking down the hallway during breaks or in between classes, it was never with a group of friends, but just alone by herself.

When she had walked home with Manami and me, her classmates had called out to her, but they didn't call out to her anymore. Even though I had often seen her classmates try to approach her just a month ago.

To be frank, there wasn't any way out of this situation. She was just too antisocial, and way too rude.

And during breaks, she probably just never dropped that expressionless, unfriendly attitude of hers.

So it's no wonder nobody liked her. She was just reaping what she sowed.

I knew how bad she was when it came to dealing with people, but couldn't she try to do just a bit better?

Part 2

“So, how’s it going at school? Made some new friends yet?”

“... Hmph, that has nothing to do with you.”

It was after school. When I asked her directly what I had wanted to ask her, she responded just how I had expected her to respond.

As the leading researcher in the field of Kuroneko-nese, allow me to translate. “Friends? As if I could make friends. Asking about it is just going to make me grumpy, so just don’t ask,” is what she meant... what a poor girl.

She sat on top of the bed hugging a pillow, and quickly turned away from me.

In case you were wondering, we were in my room, and Saori was also present. These days, these two girls would occasionally come over to my house. Saori was wearing her usual getup, and Kuroneko was in her uniform.

My predominant mental picture of Kuroneko was slowly shifting from her in a Gothic Lolita outfit to her in a uniform.

Just like how she had shifted from calling me “niisan” to calling me “senpai.”

“No, it has everything to do with us. Come on, that time before, your classmates invited you to hang out again, but you declined and just came over to my house, didn’t you? That’s exactly why you can’t make any friends!”

“... Hmph, how tragic. But someone like me does not have the time for the likes of them. Doing things like that makes them dislike me? Well, that’s perfectly fine. I hate them too.”

“You know, you...”

Geez. She was just pretending to be strong here, but from her tone it didn’t even sound like she was aware of it.

Even though she looked really lonely, not being able to fit in at school.

At that point, having heard what Kuroneko had said from her position on the floor, Saori let out a chuckle.

“Fufufu... no no no. Kyousuke-shi is quite a sharp one, he is... in other words, what Kuroneko-shi wanted to say was, ‘... I would rather be with you than play with my classmates.’”

“?!?!?”

Uwaah, she was really good at doing a Kuroneko impression.

I almost imagined that Kuroneko had indeed said that, and I felt my heart jump a little.

Bam! Suddenly, I felt the pillow Kuroneko was holding collide with my head.

“D-Don’t jump to any strange conclusions...”

“I didn’t say a single word!”

Throw the pillow at Saori, dammit.

“But you were thinking it, weren’t you? Your face suddenly had this ugly look on it and you seemed pretty happy... you’re disgusting.”

“I was born looking like this. Sorry about that.”

Well, all jokes aside...

“Let’s get back to the original topic. I honestly don’t think letting things go on like this is a good idea.”

“... Hmph... and what’s the issue, exactly? I already told you, I am the one who is deliberately isolating myself. The Organization might send its people after me at any time, so it would be reckless of me to become intimate with anybody.”

“Liar.”

“... Kyouzuke-shi, that was pretty blunt.”

But it was obviously a lie. I mean, if she was being serious, how was she going to explain her friendship with us?

Kuroneko's eyes narrowed slightly, and a faint scowl formed on her face.

“It's not a lie. And also, having to care about human customs, having to be cautious about offending anyone, having to be shrewd and pay attention to the small details just conflicts with who I am.”

Really? But weren't you the one being careful and shrewd that one time you cheered me on?

Seeming to guess my intentions, Kuroneko's mood now seemed to completely sour.

“... My goodness. Aren't you pushy? You think that I have no friends, so you want to do something to help? You really should get a dictionary and look up the word 'busybody.'”

“Ugh...”

She nailed it. That's exactly what I wanted to do.

Granted, she wasn't too off the mark when she called me a busybody. Even if she was just pretending to be strong, it was pretty presumptuous of me to tell her to fix something she said she had no problem with.

At that point, still listening to our conversation, Saori curled her mouth into a ω shape and chuckled.

"Fufufu... no no no. Kuroneko-shi is quite a sharp one, she is... in other words, what Kyouzuke-shi wanted to say was, 'I want to look good in front of my cute little kouhai. So I'll solve all her problems and then ask for ecchi things in return!'"

"How can you look so proud of yourself, interpreting it like that?! Do you seriously see me as the kind of person who'd think that way?!"

"... Impossible... Kyouzuke-shi, don't tell me you didn't have any ulterior motives..."

"No no, what's more shocking is that you can be so surprised that I wouldn't have any ulterior motives when I want to help my kouhai."

Well, I admit, I was used to Saori making these kinds of jokes.

Also, Kuroneko, don't sit there looking like a frightened animal wanting to escape.

"Y-Y-You... what did you intend to do to me...?"

“I already said I don’t have any ulterior motives! Don’t start covering up your legs with that blanket! It’s not like I’m trying to catch a glimpse of your panties or something!!”

“Kyouzuke-shi, how do you even know that you can see Kuroneko-shi’s panties from that position?”

“That was the lowest, most evil retort I’ve ever heard!”

Dammit, why did she decide to be so sharp now of all times? Just because I pointed out that I might be able to see them from this position doesn’t mean I was looking. I ended up throwing out a response somewhat nonchalantly.

“Alright, yeah yeah yeah, you’ll be happy if I admit it, right? Well... sure, I had a bit of an ulterior motive! I was really happy hearing her call me senpai, you know. So, I guess I would be lying if I said I didn’t wanted to help her deal with one of her problems... and that I didn’t want for us to become better friends from that. However, just so you know, I also am worried for her, and I just want to do something for her... that part is definitely the truth.”

I *hmped* and turned the other way. When I glanced back at the two of them, I saw Saori nodding and smiling as if she had been enlightened, while Kuroneko was still on the bed with her head resting on her knees.

“Ufufu, you know, I quite like Kyouzuke-shi when he bursts out like this.”

“..... It’s quite incredible that he can just stand there saying that with me right in front of him and still not seem embarrassed at all... ‘a bit of an ulterior motive’ ... I wonder if saying those words by itself counts as sexual harassment...”

Kuroneko whispered that to herself, while her cheeks flushed crimson.

Lately, I’ve come to realize that calling Kuroneko shy was a complete understatement.

After all, the very thought that a game character who looked like her could’ve been shown naked was enough to paralyze her and throw her for a loop, so it wasn’t an unreasonable description.

It’s ironic, considering she draws erotic doujins. Speaking of which, there was also a certain someone who played lots of eroge, but still transformed completely into a demonic Asura¹ when she heard that I was going on porn sites.

Women were just complete mysteries to me.

“In. Any. Case. That’s what we’re here to discuss today.”

¹ Something something Hinduism something something.

I was deliberately keeping my language vague.

After all, putting myself in Kuroneko's shoes, it would be pretty unpleasant to meet with your friends just to talk about how to deal with the fact that you weren't getting along with your classmates.

She might even be tempted to call us busybodies.

But Kuroneko looked quite openly annoyed about this. I said I had an ulterior motive, but at this rate, even if I solved her problem, it didn't seem like her affection points for me would increase at all.

Still, even then, I didn't mind. After all, I was trying to do this out of my personal sense of righteousness.

So if she disliked me for it, that was perfectly fine.

"Well then, if I may be so bold, I have a proposal... or rather, an idea."

"Oh, please go ahead."

"What if Kuroneko-shi joins a club? I learned this when I set up that online community, but it's much easier to get along with people who share your hobbies. After all, that's how we came to meet each other in the first place."

"... I see your point."

Ten months ago, I tried to help Kirino make friends with the same hobby, and I recommended that she try to join the SNS community “Otaku Girls Unite!”

And Saori’s suggestion here was basically the same. She wanted Kuroneko to join a club that had otaku with similar hobbies, and thus to find people who shared her interests.

“... That’s not a bad idea.”

Unlike Kirino, Kuroneko wasn’t trying to deliberately hide her identity as an otaku.

“What do you think about that plan, Kuroneko?”

“... I can guess what you’re thinking. You’re thinking about that Game Research Society from before, aren’t you?”

“Something like that, I guess.”

Bingo. For some reason, Kuroneko kept rejecting their repeated invitations, but considering how persistent they were in recruiting her, I’d bet that if she actually joined, they would treat her incredibly well. Also, I would assume that the club was predominantly male, so having a cute female gamer was probably a plus to them.

Wait, that might be a problem. Kirino also said something before about male otaku being scary...

“... What if I joined too?”

“... I wonder what twisted path of logic you followed to arrive at that conclusion.”

I suddenly realized that Kuroneko was watching me with an astounded expression.

“Well, I mean, I wouldn’t want you to feel helpless if the club is just all guys.”

“You sound like an overly-protective idiot of a father, you know.”

Saori burst into laughter.

Shut up, you. Leave me alone.

“Do you really believe that I would be relieved if you were there with me? How presumptuous. You seem to be quite confident that I like you. What filth. Please refrain from underestimating me.”

“Hearing that really puts me at a loss for words. Don’t you remember that time before when I went with you to the publishing company?”

“... And what of it?”

“Just having you there with me was pretty reassuring, that time... so I thought that maybe the reverse case was... well, I’m not saying I can do much, but it would probably be at least a bit better if we stuck together and went... uhh... well, I’m sorry.”

I tied my tongue in a knot, and then apologized.

“Hmph.”

Kuroneko swiftly turned her back to me.

“Also, are you not preparing for tests right now?”

“Well, yeah, that’s true, but...”

“Fufufu. Kuroneko-shi, why don’t you just give it a try? If you go and don’t like it, then you don’t have to join.”

Saori backed me up.

She really was pretty good at this. She had managed to come up with a pretty reasonable middle ground.

“.....”

For a while, Kuroneko seemed to be thinking silently on the bed, but she finally gave me a sweet smile and a threatening stare.

“... Alright, then. Letting this conversation drag on any further would be annoying, so I will go just once. In return, of course, I expect you to come with me. After all... you said you were worried about me, correct?”

“Sure. Got it.”

I nodded without a second thought.

Part 3

Around an hour after the two of them left, I got a call from Saori.

“What’s up? It’s usually me calling you, and not the other way around.”

“Now that you mention it, I guess that’s true. But I wanted to talk to you about Kuroneko-shi.”

“What about?”

“It’s about the reason why no matter what, Kuroneko always refuses invitations to join a club. This is just my own theory, but... I think it’s the same reason why she always refuses invitations to go somewhere with her classmates.”

“..... And what in the world is that reason?”

“Kuroneko-shi probably just doesn’t like anything taking away from the time she can spend with us. She has a part-time job, she writes doujinshi... and although I haven’t heard any details, she also seems to have a lot of other obligations after school. If she added any more to her plate, then that would mean that she would have to spend less time with us. So-”

“So she doesn’t join clubs, and she’s antisocial when it comes to her classmates?”

"Of course, she was never very good in social situations in the first place. But, I do believe Kyouusuke-shi had hit the nail on the head back there. 'It has everything to do with us,' you said... and I think that's exactly right. Precisely because our friendships are so important to her, she's isolated herself from her classmates on purpose."

"I see..."

I let out a soft sigh.

"That girl... ever since Kirino went away, she's been coming over more and more often."

"I think I can understand what she's feeling. I... I feel the same way. Up until now, us four... Kiririn-shi, Kuorneko-shi, Kyouusuke-shi, and me... we've become a pretty inseparable group. And that group naturally evolved into something special, and our days were filled with lots of joy. But... then one person disappeared... and I got scared. I became frightened that at this rate, our relationships would all start to fall apart."

Saori was talking about her own state of mind, and inferring that Kuroneko might have felt the same.

Did Saori really think about it like that...? Was that why after Kirino left, she started coming to my house quite a lot...?

Also... this is something I've thought for a while, but how was she so good at figuring out what Kuroneko was thinking? Something just felt off about the situation. It's almost as if...

"Hey, Saori. You have a lot of friends, don't you?"

"... Not at all. I don't have many at all, Kyouusuke-shi. Of course, I consider all my community members as precious friends... even close friends. Having fun with them at offline meetings, having great chats with them online, those are all really important to me. But, in terms of real friends I can hang out with often, in terms of people I can go to with my own personal problems... I only have that deep of a relationship with three people. Kiririn-shi, Kyouusuke-shi, and Kuroneko-shi."

She spoke in a tone of self-derision that I would never expect from someone like Saori.

"Friends are not meant to last forever. There's graduation, or going overseas, or arguments, or accidents, or school transfers, or illness, or misunderstandings... it's naïve, optimistic. Friendship vanishes at the smallest opportunity. I knew that from the start. So what is this? What is this anxiety, this fear I'm feeling?"

I felt as if I had just managed to take a glimpse into Saori's mysterious inner self.

I think I understood just a bit what she was feeling. That's why she was such a kind person.

In the limited time she had with her friends, Saori wanted to do as much for her friends as possible, precisely because she knew that friendship wasn't something that lasted forever. She wanted to treasure the happiness that came out of the times they could be together.

That's probably how she was thinking.

The joyful life of the party, or the fragile, weak Saori... they were both one and the same person.

I knew that now more than ever.

"Kyouzuke-shi. I beg of you, please take care of Kuroneko-shi. If there is anything I can do, please don't hesitate to ask me to do it. It would make me really happy if you could do that for me."

"Yeah. Leave it to me!"

I gave her a firm, reassuring response.

It's truly been quite a while since I've felt so pumped up.

Part 4

The Game Research Society's clubroom was on the second floor of the Club Building. As its name might suggest, the Club Building was the building that housed all the clubrooms, whether the Literary Club, the Wind Ensemble, or the Humanities Club.

"Is it here?"

We stood around the end of the hallway on the second floor, and looked up at the nameplate on the door.

The name "Game Research Society" was written on the plate.

"Alright then... shall we go?"

I looked over at Kuroneko, and saw her give me a nod.

I pushed the door open.

When we went inside, a bizarre sight greeted our eyes. What was the best way to put this into words...?

Well... the first thing that caught my attention was the bunch of black wires wriggling their way across the floor.

There were also a bunch of long tables stuck together to form a larger table. And there were around three of those in the room.

On top of the tables were monitors, various gaming consoles, and laptops.

The desktop CPUs were placed under the desk, probably to save space. It was spring, but the air conditioning was on, probably to offset the heat the computers likely gave off. This strange neither-hot-nor-cold atmosphere permeated the room.

There were around four or five people in the room. Everyone was male. Each person in the room was handling a keyboard, or a mouse, or a controller, and was busy doing their own things. But the few people closest to the door noticed our entrance, and turned their eyes in our direction.

The male student sitting closest to us immediately stood up and walked towards us.

“Welcome, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

“Ahh, hello.”

Kuroneko showed no signs of talking, so I was the one who responded.

This was the same guy who tried to get Kuroneko to join the club in the school courtyard that other day. He was also the person I asked when I decided that we wanted to come take a look around.

“Once again, my name is Makabe, and I’m a second year.”

“I’m Kousaka, and I’m in my third year. This is Gokou, and she’s in her first.”

When I said her name, Kuroneko gave a slight nod.

“It’s very nice to meet you.”

“It’s very nice to meet you too.”

Makabe-kun definitely was a pretty polite person. He looked quite young, and he carried a rather serious air about him. When it came down to it, he did look like an otaku, but he didn’t seem like the type of guy that Kuroneko should be afraid of.

“Please allow me to thank you, Kousaka-senpai. I’m really grateful you convinced Gokou-san to come.”

“You really don’t need to thank me. She was the one who decided she wanted to come here, and it’s not like she’s decided to actually join yet.”

“Even then, just having her being interested in our club activities is enough to make me happy. Well, let me introduce our club president right away.”

“Hm? You’re not the club president?”

He was a second year, and it was pretty rare to see someone who was so dedicated, so I thought that he was surely the president. But it seemed that the president was someone different.

“Ahaha, no, I’m just an underling. Umm, please, this way.”

Makabe led us inside the clubroom. And the farther we walked into the room, the more messy things became. And what’s more, there were eroge boxes and figures publically displayed on top of the desks. Yet, this person was also the club president... he must be a pretty huge otaku.

And then, I saw the game sitting at the top of his mountain of eroge.

“... Isn’t that Onipan...?”

And, isn’t this figure Fana, the Onipan heroine...?

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Ah, no, nothing at all...”

Why have I played the same game that this through-and-through otaku club president has?

Not good. At some point, I might have honestly crossed over the bridge of no return...

“Hey Prez. Kousaka-san and Gokou-san are here.”

Makabe-kun stopped in the deepest part of the room and called out to someone.

The person in question was hunched over and busily working away at something, but he sluggishly stood up.

“Ah, nice job.”

Giving Makabe his thanks, this person turned to look at us.

... You know, I get the feeling that I’ve definitely seen this person somewhere...

I narrowed my eyes and stared at the president. His hair was pitch black, he wore glasses, and he was pretty thin...

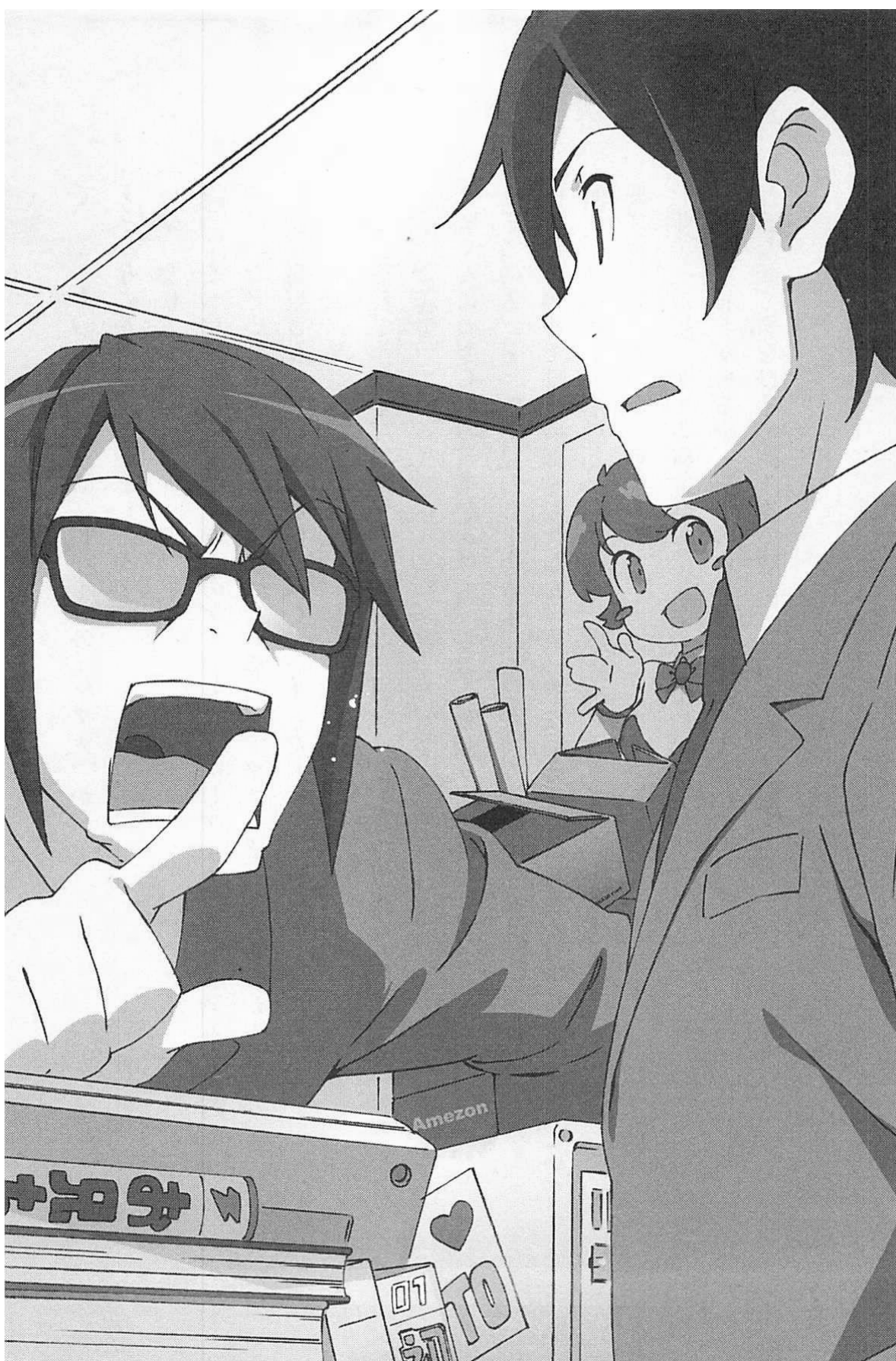
What was it...? Where have I seen him before...? I tried racking my brains, but I came up empty.

He greeted us.

“I’m Miura. A third year. I’m the Game Research Society presi-“

Once he caught a glimpse of my face, he cut off his words mid-sentence.

He frowned, looking puzzled... and then in the next moment, his eyes opened wide.



“Ah! Y-You! I thought I’d seen you before!”

“Huh?”

“You were the one who borrowed my Fana-tan bike at the late-night eroge sale, weren’t you?!”

“Ahhh!!”

You, you’re that guy?! The one who had that otaku jacket?!

It’s no wonder we have the same game! I remember now! So this is what you looked like?! And you’re a student... and we’re in the same year?! But you look so damn old!!

As the president and I pointed at each other, Kuroneko stared at us as if she were looking at something dirty and spoke up.

“..... A friend of yours?”

“Huh? Uhh, no, not exactly a friend...”

How exactly should I explain this to her? While I tried to find the right words, the club president came at me. “What the hell are you playing dumb for?!”

“Give me back my bike, asshole!”

“Gyahh!! Sorry!”

Clap! I clapped my two hands together in front of me and apologized.

“I went back to Akiba Station a lot of times after that to return the bike! But I couldn’t find you...!”

“Ah, really?”

All signs of anger vanished from the club president’s face. He began to scratch the back of his head.

“Ahh, well, if you tried to get it back to me, then it’s fine. I don’t know the details, but your little sister was in trouble, right? And I mean, I was so busy trying to look cool back then that I forgot to even give you my name and address! So I guess it’s no wonder you couldn’t get my bike back to me!”

“... I’m really, really sorry.”

I bowed my head over and over again in shame.

Ugh, a sense of guilt just filled up my chest.

The only reason we'd gotten into this mess was because I promised him I would return the bike... I'm the worst.

And then, the president spoke in a tone you would expect from a newlywed husband worrying about his wife.

"It's fine, it's fine... but more importantly, my Fana-tan bike... are you treating her well? She hasn't caught a cold or anything, right?"

"Please don't worry. She's in our garage, covered with a plastic sheet."

I went all the way to a bike shop in the next town, and even got some maintenance done on her. After all, she was an important item I was entrusted with. And please, just try to imagine my dashing figure handing over this otaku bike to the girl who ran the bike shop.

"Alright. I'll come by today to grab it then."

"Got it."

The other club members occasionally glanced over at us while the president and I were talking.

"Ummmmm... prez. How do you know Kousaka-senpai?"

Makabe-kun took the initiative and asked that question.

The club president, the same person I had met at that late-night sale wearing an otaku jacket, stood straight up, and put his arms around my shoulders without a care in the world. He gave a huge smile, his canines showing as he did.

“As a matter of fact, we’re comrades who loved the same woman!”

“Don’t put it in a way that might get misunderstood!”

See?! Kuroneko’s stare is just getting colder and colder!

Makabe glared at the president, his eyes half-lidded, and his cheek twitching in annoyance.

“Don’t worry, Kousaka-senpai. The president always makes terrible jokes like this. We’re all aware of it. From context, he was talking about erogé, right? That is, that Kousaka-senpai and our president both love the same 2D girl in an erogé, right?”

“Wrong! You still got the most important part wrong!”

This guy... how he could misinterpret things in the worst possible light was really pretty irritating.

“Oh? I thought you were both interested in the same thing, and collect dakimakura¹ of characters and things like that. Am I wrong? He said you were comrades, so I thought that Kousaka-senpai also seriously falls in love with 2D girls like our president does.”

“I like 3D girls, thank you very much!!”

What the hell are you making me say?! Also, what the hell am I saying in the middle of the damn school?!

Kuroneko’s sub-zero glare pierced me straight through.

“... Let’s stop there, if you please. This is disgusting and an earsore. But please give us a simple explanation. Exactly how do you know this person?”

“I met him in line at a late-night erogé sale.”

Finding no other way out, I just told her the truth. Kuroneko should be able to guess that I was there only because my little sister asked me to be there. By which I mean, please God, I hope she guesses that.

The club president quickly nodded his agreement with my explanation.

¹ Hug pillows.

“Ah, right, I promised myself that I would ask you if I ever met you again. What happened after that? Did you get that eroge to your hospital-ridden, terminally ill little sister?”

“So suddenly I have a terminally ill little sister, huh...?”

“Getting eroge to a terminally ill little sister... what on Earth are you two talking about?”

I had no idea how to respond to Makabe-kun’s icy-cold interruption.

And I guess if you count “little sister moe” as a terminal disease, it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to say that my little sister was terminally ill.

But I can imagine how it would be incredibly confusing listening to me and the club president talk as a bystander.

Also, I guess I never went into details with the president either, that night of the sale.

“Umm... it’s a bit hard to explain, but... yeah I got it safely to her. Miura-san, please let me thank you again. I’m really grateful for what you did for me back there.”

I bowed, and the president shook his head. “Ah, no, it was nothing.”

He gave me a friendly chuckle and patted me on the shoulders.

“Well, anyways, this... Kousaka, was it? We’re great friends.”

“You’re great friends, but you didn’t even know his name? Well, whatever...”

There was a feeling of resignation in each and every one of Makabe-kun’s words.

I got the feeling that these two have had this type of exchange countless times before.

“Also, Kousaka-senpai. I’m sure you’ve had this on your mind, so please allow me to explain. This person has been held back a grade quite a few times. That’s why he looks so old.”

Ah, so that’s why.

He can throw in a snarky response when the occasion arises, but he’s also good at explaining things... Makabe-kun, you’re a great mediator, you know that?

“Hey, Makabe, don’t just go and blurt out other people’s personal histories like that. You’re making me blush.”

“You don’t have to blush. Just show some shame and graduate already. When I was a first year, you were already president, weren’t you? Aren’t you tired of it?”

“You know, I’ve always thought this, but your little retorts are always so dry. You really should learn from Kyouzuke here.”

The club president finally took his hands off my shoulders, crossed his arms, and gave out a booming laugh.

He certainly laughed pretty often. Also, even though we had just met, he was already calling me by my first name only.

“Not only do we have our new star player here, but to think I would be able to meet with my comrade again... today is indeed a good day.”

“I’m glad I met you again too.”

This was my lucky day.

The Game Research Society president, Miura-san, was my savior and was every bit as weird as he looked...

But he was a very good person. If you trust my opinion that is.

And for now, I guess I could trust him and leave my cute kouhai in his care.

“.....”

Although, the Kuroneko in question had been standing there, giving me and the club president this icy stare for this entire time.

“W-What?”

“... Nothing... you’ve become quite the otaku when I wasn’t looking, haven’t you senpai?”

I couldn’t say a word in response.

I wonder what my past self would say if he saw me today. He probably wouldn’t believe that who he was looking at was the same person.

“AIIIIIIrighty then.”

The president gave a huge, extravagant stretch and pushed his glasses up.

“Welcome to the Game Research Society, you two.”

Part 5

Next, the club president explained to us exactly what the Game Research Society did.

“Ummmmmm... where should I begin? Makabe, how much have you told them?”

“Well, I told them that we make doujin games and participate in events. About that much.”

“I see, I see. By the way, you two, do you know what we mean when we say ‘doujin’ and ‘event’?”

He had directed the question at me, so I answered for myself and for Kuroneko. “Yeah, we understand. More or less.”

“Have you gone to any?”

“I’ve only been to one. This girl’s been to quite a few, though.”

“Ah, then I’ll just skip the explanations for those. That’s good. It makes the conversation easier. Umm, well, our main activity is making doujin games. Though, on paper, we’re technically a club that engages in ‘cultural activities.’”

The president looked around the room.

“And, in terms of making these games, it’s not like every club member participates in that. Actually, we have a lot of ghost members in this club, and besides us, the only other people who come every day are the two over there.”

“Hey.” “Yo.”

Two chubby-looking people in the room working on their PCs looked at us and raised their hands.

The club president looked back at us.

“We’re going to have a welcoming reception for all the new members, and all the club members will be here. I’ll definitely introduce you to everyone then.”

“Sure.”

They have lots of ghost members... this was a pretty half-assed club, wasn’t it?

Seeming to read my mind, Makabe-kun explained further.

“You could say our club is pretty free, or flexible. But it’s not like we’re doing things half-heartedly. Each and every club member finds a game they want to make and tries their best to make it.”

“And you can even make an erogé if you want. Right, Makabe?”

“Prez, please be a bit more tactful. I’m trying to get them to know a bit about our club’s good points, but you’re spoiling all of it. Also, don’t I always tell you that playing erogé inside the clubroom isn’t allowed? So why do you still have to go out of your way to play them here? Play them at home, please.”

“Don’t ask such tasteless questions, Makabe... if you have a woman you love, wouldn’t you want to always be with that woman? I’m not proud of it, but sometimes I even play in the classroom during break times.”

This guy was seriously crazy. I’m so glad we aren’t in the same class.

“Prez, even if you try to act cool about it, that doesn’t make it any less creepy. There are girls in your class too, so please have a bit more respect.”

“Ugh, shut up. You my mom or something?”

Just watching this exchange was enough to understand what roles the president and Makabe played in the club.

“Also, trying to make it sound better isn’t going to work. No matter how you look at it, our club is pretty half-assed. And there’s no point in trying to get someone to join without having them understand exactly what they’re joining. Right?”

“... That may be true, but even then, there’s something to be said about choosing the right words. Umm... Kousaka-senpai, our president might put it that way, but there are definitely people who are serious about making games here. Of course, there are also people who only talk about games, and there are also people who only show up every so often.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling that this club is pretty laid back. But there are also more motivated people who work hard?”

“Yes.”

“So, that means... well, I’m a third year, so I have to take exams. So it’s alright if I join as more of a ghost member? Or rather, it’s alright if I only show my face occasionally?”

“We’d welcome you with open arms. After all, if you’d allow me to speak about it from a more financial point of view, even the ghost members pay club dues.”

If that’s how things worked, then if Kuroneko joined the club, I’d go with that option.

Kuroneko hadn’t said a word for a while, and I turned to her.

“Come on...”

“.....”

Kuroneko sunk deep into thought with her head facing downward. She then glanced around the clubroom, inspecting the club members, before finally looking up at the club president and muttering.

“Then... you’re saying that you aren’t that interested in making games?”

“Absolutely not! I’m making games with all my strength!”

The club president puffed out his chest. I could not sense any lie from his words.

Kuroneko continued her questioning with her emotionless tone.

“... And what genre do you focus on? STG, am I right?”

“Nah, I’ll make anything.”

“What tools do you work with?”

“We should have all the necessities. We have the equipment, the software... and also the books. Technical books. All the books in that shelf over there are free to be taken out by any of our club members.”

When he said that they were “free to be taken out,” Kuroneko seemed slightly surprised.

“..... But you couldn’t have covered the cost of all of those with your club dues alone.”

“Well, that’s true. I paid for them all myself. I mean, think about what it’s like being in junior high or high school. You don’t really have enough money to buy technical books that cost a few thousand yen¹, and when it comes to expensive software like Photoshop, there are plenty of people who wouldn’t be able to use those programs even if they wanted to. I was like that too.”

The president spoke like an adult, even though he was also a high school student.

Exactly how old was he?

¹ The current conversion rate is around 100 yen per dollar. Holy hell that’s cheap. GO USD!

“I mean, if someone’s really motivated, they could get a part-time job and prepare all the tools they would need to make games. But it’s frustrating when you have to pay for your education too. When I was a first year, I thought about this all while I was working for a moving company. I thought, wouldn’t it be nice if there could be a clubroom that had all the tools you needed to make games, and a bunch of fellow people who wanted to make and study games?”

The president showed us his teeth and gave us an eerie chuckle. And he readily made his next statement.

“So I tried to make that club.”

“..... I see.”

Kuroneko fell into silence once again. She slowly looked around at the equipment in the room and the bookshelves.

I didn’t know what Kuroneko was thinking after hearing about the history of the club.

But, I was pretty sure I knew what she wanted to say, so I said it in her place.

“This girl is interested in making games.”

“Oh? So, what can you do? Can you code? Can you draw? Compose music? I’m assuming you’re not saying that you just want to write scenarios because that’s all you can do, right?”

Babble babble babble babble. The president let loose a string of words I didn’t really understand.

Kuroneko gave her response without hesitation.

“... All of those.”

“All of those... you can do all of those things?”

“... Well, I’m not too certain what would qualify as being able to do those things... but at the very least, there’s no need to teach me everything from square one.”

Kuroneko spoke timidly, but the president seemed really impressed.

“Hey hey Makabe. She’s quite a lucky find, isn’t she?”

“I told you, didn’t I? That she’s a great addition to our club.”

Makabe-kun looked pretty proud of himself. Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but I think I need to remind you of something.

“Hey, remember, she hasn’t decided to join yet.”

Kuroneko picked one of the technical books close to her up, and began flipping through it.

“... What do you think? It doesn’t seem to be that strict of a club... do you want to try it out?”

“... It seems they have software and equipment I don’t have here. And it seems that to some extent, I’ll be free to work on what I want. It could be slightly better than working alone at home... so it may not be a bad idea to spend some of my game-making time here...”

The president and Makabe exchanged glances and smiled broadly.

I chuckled internally. After all, I could imagine exactly how Kuroneko was going to respond in the next moment.

“Please don’t look so happy. If I find that this club is no use to me, I will quit... I don’t have that much free time, you know.”

See? She’s blushing.

Part 6

For that reason, Kuroneko and I began to go to the game club around twice every week.

Kuroneko seemed pretty busy lately, and I had to study for my exams, so it was the very best we could do to make it to club twice a week. And yes, the original first priority was to get Kuroneko into a club in order to find her friends who had the same hobby... but at this point, I didn't really know how well that would go.

After all, at quick glance, it seemed that the game club had no girls in it. And in the end, it would be best if she ended up making friends with people of the same gender, and in the same grade. Ideally, she would make friends with her classmates. I mean, if she didn't do that, she would just continue to be left out during PE class when people got paired off, you see? And it was because I didn't want that to happen that I tried to help in the first place.

We left the clubroom, and we began to walk down the hall when I tried to get some information out of Kuroneko indirectly.

"Are any of your classmates in the club?"

"... Who knows? It's not as if I remember each and every one of my classmates' faces."

Just look at this. This is why she can't make friends.

... Well, looks like I'm out of options. I'm going to have to go with my usual fallback option.

And what is that, you ask? Well... it was time to beg others for help.

In fact, the face of the person who I thought could help me out the best in this situation had already clearly appeared in my mind.

Soon, it was lunch break the following day. I began to walk all the way down to the second-year rooms to meet with "that person" as soon as possible.

"Huh? You're asking me if my club has first-year girls as members...?"

"Yeah. I figured you'd know."

Yes. The person I had gone to for help was the game club member, Makabe-kun.

He cocked his head to the side and tossed me back a question.

"Why exactly are you asking? You looking to seduce one of them or something? Even though you already have a pretty cute girlfriend."

"Huh? Girlfriend?"

“Gokou-san, of course. Am I wrong?”

His words threw me completely off-guard, so I hesitated for a moment before answering.

“Nah... we’re not like that. Umm, do we look like we are?”

“Yes.”

So it seemed we did. I see. So we looked like we were like that... hmph.

“Well, that’s fine then. So why exactly are you asking me that?”

“Ah, well, it’s just that when she’s only surrounded by boys, I think it’s difficult for Gokou-san to be there.”

Makabe-kun seemed to be the type to want to stay on topic. Not that I didn’t like that.

“Well, if that’s the case, then we do have an Akagi-san in the club, who’s a first-year girl.”

“..... A-Akagi?”

“Yes. She wears glasses and her full name is Akagi Sena. The other day, I told you that there was another new student that was really good at games, I think... that student was Akagi-san... hmm? Is something wrong?”

“Ahh... no... nothing at all.”

Hmm... t-that's quite a familiar-sounding last name...

“Was that girl in the clubroom when we were there?”

“No, she wasn't.”

“Hmm. Well, is there anybody else? It doesn't have to be someone in her class, but any other first-year girl would be fine.”

“There aren't any more. The girls do tend to join the manga club more, so...”

“I see.”

So, it looked like my only option was to make sure that this girl with the familiar last name and Kuroneko got along really well.

“By the way, what kind of girl is she?”

“Akagi-san, you mean? Well... I guess... from just a glance, she really doesn't seem like an otaku.”

“Hmm. But, I guess... in the end, she is an otaku, right? After all, you tried to recruit her into the game club because she was really good at games, right?”

“Yeah... I guess that's what you would expect.”

Makabe-kun gave me a dry chuckle.

“That girl is amazing at games, but she never talks about them at all. Even when she comes to club, all she does is read technical books or stare at the computer screen... I haven't really even talked to her much. Honestly, I still don't know exactly why she chose to join the club.”

“Is she hard to get along with?”

“Hmm... well, I mean, we barely have any other girls in the club. So I guess it's not a surprise that she feels a bit hard to talk to...”

“Ah, so it's like that. It's really pretty tough to be the only girl in a crowd of boys...”

“Yes, it really is. So it was really a godsend for Gokou to also join our club. We also have a few second-year girls in the club, but they barely ever show up.”

I see. I feel like I understand a little better about why exactly Makabe-kun was so desperate in trying to get Kuroneko to join the club.

It wasn't just because he wanted to recruit a really talented female gamer, but probably because he wanted to do something for the kouhai in the club who tended to isolate herself.

If that's the case... then I think our goals were one and the same.

"It'd be nice if Gokou and that Akagi girl could become friends, wouldn't it? For both of them."

"Yes, definitely."

Information gathering complete. We faced each other for a while and fell into thought.

After a while, Makabe-kun hit his fist into his open palm.

"Ah, right. In that case, how about this?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you know about our new member welcome party?"

“I think the president might have mentioned something about that.”

“When it gets to this time into the semester, all the clubs have something of a party to welcome their new members. Our club plans to have ours this weekend. So, if we can get Gokou-san and Akagi-san to sit close to each other, that’ll encourage them to start talking and they’ll become friends, right?”

Probably not. I think Makabe-kun was giving Kuroneko’s communication skills way too much credit.

If we used a plan like that, we would have to be close by as safety nets.

“I see... that’s not a bad idea at all.”

“Then let’s do that.”

“Yeah. Ahh, but I’m really sorry, imposing on you like this even though we’ve only just met.”

“I don’t mind. It’s all for the sake of our cute kouhai, right?”

Makabe-kun gave me a gentle smile.

Geez. It really seems like there are a lot of younger, reliable people around me these days.

Part 7

After school that day, I was walking out of school with Manami as usual. On a side note, we never really made plans to meet with Kuroneko after school, but if we did meet her on the way we would end up walking back together.

That girl usually tried to get back as soon as possible, so if I headed straight for the shoeboxes at the building entrance after the last homeroom, there was a good chance I would run into her.

And so, when I hurried towards the shoeboxes today, I saw Kuroneko on the landing between the first and second floors. But she didn't seem like she was on her way out of the building.

She stood there without any expression on her face, sweeping the floor with a broom.

"Ah, it's your turn to clean up today?"

"..... Yes it is."

Kuroneko paid us a single glance. Even while she looked at us, her hands didn't stop moving as she swept the broom across the landing.

She was pretty good at that. I imagined that she must be used to doing this at home.

“Where are all the other people who are supposed to sweep the stairs?”

Manami tilted her head and asked that question.

Kuroneko completely ignored her question, and just continued her work.

..... Hmm. I thought about it hard for a moment, and then turned to Manami.

“Wait just a second.”

I went down the stairs, walked right down the hallway, and headed towards the other set of stairs in this school building.

I walked up those stairs to the very top, walked down the hallway on the top floor, and then headed back to the first set of stairs.

Walking down those stairs, I finished the loop and returned to where Kuroneko and Manami were.

..... It was exactly as I thought.

“What’s wrong all of a sudden, Kyou-chan?”

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

Taking Manami with me, we left that place and Kuroneko behind.

Once I had put enough distance between us and Kuroneko, I spoke up again.

“Hey, Manami.”

“Hm?”

The territory the first years had to cover for cleaning the stairs was the staircase the Kuroneko was working on, as well as the staircase on the other end of the building.

“I took a look at the other set of stairs too... but there was nobody there.”

“Ah, I see.”

She seemed to guess what was going on just from that, and a tinge of sadness crossed Manami’s face.

All the other people charged with cleaning the stairs had left it all to Kuroneko alone and had all gone home.

This wasn’t that uncommon of an occurrence, and it wasn’t serious enough to be considered bullying.

They might have just left because they thought it was too annoying, and even if they really were doing it out of ill will, they probably just wanted to play a mean joke on their unsociable classmate who always left the earliest. Compared to the sudden death eroge and ero book traps that a certain brute had set for me, this was completely, utterly tame.

And I might be repeating myself, but Kuroneko was the one who chose to be antisocial, through that crucial period right after one enters a new school. So she was to blame for some of this, and she was reaping what she sowed. There wasn't any room for me to feel sympathy. There wasn't any room, but...

"Alright, Kyou-chan. I brought brooms and dustpans."

"H-How thoughtful..."

Sometimes... I honestly thought this girl could read my mind.

The two of us started to sweep the stairs, starting with the staircase opposite to Kuroneko's.

When we were mostly done with the cleaning and just collecting the trash on the staircase landing, Kuroneko showed up.

The minute she found us, her eyes widened for a moment. And then her expression sharpened.

“..... What exactly are you doing?”

“We’re doing exactly what we look like we’re doing. We’re cleaning the stairs.”

I gave her a nonchalant answer, and poured the contents of my dustpan into the garbage bag Manami was holding open for me.

My casual attitude seemed to get on her nerves. Kuroneko’s tone became even harsher.

“..... This does not please me at all. Are you trying to take pity on me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. You couldn’t stand watching me cleaning alone, so you went off to do this, correct? It is none of your concern. Do I really have to tell you that every time?”

No. That’s exactly what I thought you would say. That’s why we started on the other set of stairs.

“Well, sorry then. But, we’ve already pretty much finished up here. So, I guess you’ll have to forgive us today.”

“.....”

Kuroneko fiercely bit her lower lip. Her pride made it very difficult for her to accept our kindness at a time like this. But we'd known she wouldn't like what we were doing, and we were forcing our kindness onto her even knowing that. Saori probably would've been able to figure out some better way to do this without getting her angry, but I didn't know any. I apologize for that.

But..... even I didn't know she would get this angry.

"Don't expect any thanks for this."

"Of course we don't. We just did this because we felt like it."

At that, Kuroneko's eyes narrowed. There was an awkward silence. Then, she spoke in a heavy tone.

"You said once before that you weren't lying when you said that you worried about me, right?"

"Yeah. I wasn't lying."

"Ah, is that so? ... Yes, I understand now. That you certainly, certainly, *certainly* were not lying. However... I wonder, have you ever thought about where exactly those feelings come from? Or rather... have you realized it, but you're just pretending not to know?"

What exactly is she trying to say?

Feeling pinned down by this pressure, all I could do was keep looking at her.

“... I thought I would spare you the pain and not say this to you, but having things like this happening so often is very troublesome, so I will tell you exactly where those feelings come from.”

Standing above me on the staircase, Kuroneko looked down at me haughtily and pointed a finger right at me.

“The reason you seem to care about me is because the sister you used to go out of your way to help so much has left. And I am your junior, a girl, and seem to have my own set of problems. *I seem to be the kind of person that would rely on you, and that is the only reason you care.*”

After that, Kuroneko turned sharply on her heels.

“I am no substitute for your little sister. So do not take me for an idiot, please.”

And after spitting out those final words, Kuroneko strode away and left.

Part 8

And then, it was Saturday. It was the day of that new member welcome party or whatever.

Right after classes ended, I went all the way to Kuroneko's classroom to meet her. After that exchange we had the other day, I was afraid she would decide not to go to the party.

Yes. For the few days since that exchange, Kuroneko and I had not looked each other in the eyes even once.

... Not a substitute for my little sister, huh?

It sounded like a line right out of one of the manga she liked.

However, to be honest... her words hit home. They really, really hit home.

I mean... was she completely right? Was the reason I wanted to meddle in Kuroneko's business because I was just using her in place of my now-gone little sister?

I really believed that the first few months right after you entered school were important months that decided the direction of your entire life at that school.

You would pick the club you belonged to, the social circle you belong to... it was a time where you determined your position within your school (or rather, your class).

And if you failed to come out strong during those first few months of battle, then you might find that your school life has suddenly taken a turn for the worst. School wasn't as rosy a place as adults might imagine it to be. Well, there were definitely rosy parts... and maybe even the majority of school life was rosy, but there were definitely cruel, severe parts of school life that only the students themselves were aware of.

Even someone like me who prized peace and tranquility above all else knew that much about school life. I went through elementary and middle school myself, after all.

That's why I couldn't help but be concerned for my cute kouhai. That wasn't a lie; it was the honest truth.

But was that all? Was that the only reason?

No, it probably wasn't.

There was a reason I went so far out of my way to interfere in Kuroneko's business...

There was a reason I always wanted to do something for her, even though she didn't want me to...

Probably...

It was probably because seeing her standing there looking lonely made me think about a certain someone else from a certain time ago.

That person was no longer here, but that feeling about being able to do something for her back then...

That feeling still remained in my heart even today. I was happy that she relied on me, but those occurrences were no more.

That's why... that's why...

"..... Ugh, I'm being way too gloomy today."

... And what's more, I was completely found out, wasn't I?

Even I could admit that I didn't look too cool back there. But, even so, that didn't change what I had to do.

Just because I had found the rather tasteless motive I had for wanting to help her didn't mean I suddenly didn't want to help her. I also had that promise with Saori to think about.

Saori had entrusted me with Kuroneko. I couldn't get rid of these confused feelings in my heart, but I knew exactly what I had to do.

And I knew what I myself wanted to do.

“Well, I guess I have to do what I have to do.”

I muttered to myself and then pulled myself back towards reality. I found myself standing right in front of the first-year class one classroom.

Homeroom was already over, and I saw a few students coming out on their way home. I peeked into the room, with the fear that Kuroneko had already headed straight back.

She wasn't there.

“Crap...”

I smacked myself on the forehead. I had to act quickly. Maybe I could catch up to her if I ran.

I turned sharply on my heel, and then...

“Uwaah!”

I was completely taken aback with surprise and almost jumped up. Because when I turned around, I saw Kuroneko standing right in front of me. She was as expressionless as usual, and was staring up at me from point-blank range.

“..... Looking all around like that in a first-year classroom really makes you seem like a pervert.”

“Oogh.....”

She was still angry with me, wasn't she? Granted, she always insulted me like this, so it's not like I could tell the difference...

“Umm...”

What should I say? I had gone over a lot of ways to apologize and invite her to the party in my head, but once I had her standing in front of me I couldn't remember any of it anymore... As I struggled to find the right words to say, Kuroneko silently turned away from me. She then turned her head towards me and gave me a cold, sidelong glance.

“Hmph. Let's hurry it up, please.”

Kuroneko began to walk away quickly. I chased after her while scratching my cheek.

It seemed that we were headed in the same direction as the new member welcome party.

I had been under the rather arrogant belief that our friendship had grown stronger, but right now, I had no shot in hell of figuring out exactly what Kuroneko was thinking, or what she was feeling about me.

Part 9

The welcoming party didn't take place in a classroom cramped with equipment and parts, but in an AV room that the club had been given permission to use by the school. It wasn't that formal of a gathering, but rather one where they provided snacks and beverages and we would have a good time while we ate and drank. Well, it was what you might expect from a high school club.

When I said "what you might expect," I mean that with a sense of disappointment.

But that feeling as probably because I was so used to the flashy gatherings that Saori usually organized.

So my scale of what counted as "normal" was completely out of whack.

I chased after Kuroneko as she walked away so fast that I wondered if she was trying to run away from something.

"Umm... I'm honestly relieved. I really thought you were going to hate going to this welcome party."

"Yes... I am already very, very reluctant to go. Honestly, there isn't anything I hate going to more than parties like this."

Kuroneko faced forwards and spoke without even looking in my direction.

I timidly began to ask her why she was going to a gathering she found so unpleasant. But before I could, she spoke first.

“The tools they have in that clubroom... well, it’s certainly much more convenient if I can just use them there, rather than going to a part-time job and buying them myself. So even if I find it a bit unpleasant, I thought I would come here to see everyone today. There isn’t another reason.”

“... Oh, I see then.”

Half of what she said was probably the truth.

However, that wasn’t all... in fact, I believed there was “another reason.”

“Hmmm... I don’t think that Kuroneko-shi is really that angry. If you just put yourself in her shoes, it’s no wonder at all that she would say something nasty. It’s alright, if you give her a proper apology, I’m sure she’ll forgive you.

I had gone to Saori for advice about what had happened that other day, and that was her response.

I didn’t really know how I was supposed to put myself in Kuroneko’s shoes, and it’s not like Saori told me how, but in short... when it came to girls, and not just Kuroneko, there was always “another reason.”

That’s how it probably worked.

“.....”

The minute Kuroneko arrived in front of the door, she stopped, and gave me an emotionless order.

“Go in first.”

“Got it.”

Kuroneko took a step back and I took her place in front of the door. And then, I pushed the door open.

There were already club members inside the room, preparing for the party. The preparations themselves weren't that fancy; they were just lining up a bunch of long desks in a circle and pouring drinks into cups. We gave a light bow and entered, and even though they were already halfway done, we started helping them out.

And because this was a new member's welcoming party, I saw a few faces I hadn't seen before.

The ghost members of the club were also here.

The preparations were soon finished, and people began to sit down wherever they pleased.

I sat in one corner where there were quite a few empty seats, and Kuroneko plopped herself down right next to me.

“..... What?”

“Ah, nothing...”

Kuroneko was a shy person, so I had counted on my prediction that no matter how unpleasant she might find it, she would sit next to me, a person she was already familiar with. Now then... where was Sena-chan, the other crucial half of this plan?

I looked all around me, when I saw a girl wearing glasses who might be her.

She was a bit on the tall side. Even though her body was slim, her chest was disproportionately big, and gave her a more seductive, adult appeal.

Her hairstyle was a more formal style you might expect from a student, but because her hair was a reddish color, it came off as much more casual. The red didn't look like it came from a dye, but seemed like it was her natural color.

The design of her glasses were also pretty contemporary. To be frank, she seemed like quite a refined girl.

However, she had a stern frown on her face, and with the way she was carrying herself, she might as well have stamped a huge “Bad Mood. Stay Away” in boldface on her forehead.

She seemed like she still couldn’t decide where to sit, and Makabe-kun smartly took that opportunity to call out to her.

“Akagi-san, this seat over here is open.”

“..... Ahh.”

Sena took a quick glance in this direction.

“Yes, you’re right. I suppose that would be the best option for me.”

She wiped the chair with a handkerchief, and took a seat between Makabe-kun and myself.

In other words, going around the circle from the left, it was Kuroneko, me, Sena, Makabe-kun, some fatso, the president, some other fatso, and I’ll omit the rest.

I was unexpectedly squeezed in the middle. Granted, this was pretty convenient, I suppose. If I wanted to serve as a mediator to help get these two’s friendship going, this was probably the best position from which to do that. I honestly wasn’t that confident that I could be of much help, but I would do what I could do.

“Well, it seems everyone’s found their seat... so let’s begin.”

Makabe-kun looked around at everyone as he spoke. Voices of agreement sounded here and there, and then the room became quiet.

“Alright, prez, you’re up.”

“Got it. Let’s have a great time and be a great club this year too. Kanpai.”¹

“Kanpai.” Everyone raised their glass after the president’s incredibly concise toast.

The minute the welcoming party began, the room filled with noisy revelry.

I looked around at the people gathered. These were all supposed to be game-loving otaku, but from the point of view of someone who was more used to the kind of otaku at Comiket or cosplay exhibitions, they really didn’t seem like that.

This probably goes without saying, but it was probably because everyone was young, and everyone was wearing a uniform.

¹ The traditional way to end a toast at a party or other social event in Japan.

However, the pieces of conversation I overheard here and there were definitely those of otaku. It felt like they had gathered a bunch of game-lovers into a room and just let them talk freely.

However, Kuroneko was...

“.....”

She was completely silent and staring forwards, without even making a move to pick up her food.

This girl... she really was terrible when it came to situations like this. To be honest, I was worried about this ever since I heard that this would be a party. It's just that this wasn't the only time this has happened; even though this girl did really poorly when it came to places with lots of people, she never learned and always went to those events anyways. So, even though I would never say this to her out loud... Kuroneko might be pretty hard to get along with, but that doesn't mean she didn't want to make friends.

As proof, just think about how important Kirino was to Kuroneko, and think about how lonely she looked when Kirino disappeared. She might appear emotionless, but she really had quite a deep well of emotions.

“Alright then...”

What should I do here?

I turned to look at Sena on my right. No matter what this girl's personality was, she probably wouldn't initiate a conversation with Kuroneko just based on how much of a stand-offish aura Kuroneko was giving out. It seemed like I would have to be the one to approach her and lead her in.

"Umm... nice to meet you. I'm Kousaka, a third year."

"Nice to meet you. I'm a first year. Akagi."

"A-Ah, I see."

Seeing her up close like this reaffirmed what Makabe-kun had told me.

She really didn't seem like an otaku at all. She really seemed refined... but at the same time, she seemed different from Kirino and Kirino's friends.

Leaving her appearance aside for now, if I used eroge as an analogy², she was the very picture of the "student committee chair" type of character.

I didn't mean she was a warm, serious type. Rather, she felt more like that faultless, intelligent beauty of a student committee chair who you would never be able to get.

² Compare everything to eroge. Best way to make friends.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing, it’s just that you didn’t seem like you were having a good time. I was wondering if you were just not in the best mood... or something.”

“That’s how my face has always looked.”

“A-Ah, I see.”

Geez, this was hard.

When she saw me at a loss, Sena seemed a bit displeased and scratched her cheek. Unlike Kuroneko, she didn’t seem to be the emotionless type.

“Ahh, well, I guess I am in somewhat of a bad mood. I just have a hard time with this club.”

“And why is that?”

“Hmmm. Well, first off, it feels dirty being surrounded by all these talentless boys. Second, everything feels like it’s done sloppily, considering all the games the club members make are so weird and otherwise, all they do is chat with each other. Third, they don’t even have the common sense to know that it’s not appropriate to display figures in a classroom and to play adult games out in the open.”

Sena faced a person she had never met before and, counting on her fingers, went through all the things that were making her unhappy. But everything she said was absolutely correct. When she puts it like that, I doubt any member of the game club would be able to say anything to defend himself.

“Then, why did you join the club?”

I asked that question out of the blue. Makabe-kun had probably been the one who recruited her, but if she didn’t want to join, she could have just refused his invitation. And considering all the harsh things she said about the club, I doubt it was because she was too meek to refuse. To my question, Sena responded thusly:

“Because I wanted to study programming.”

“Uhh... pro... gramming?”³

Sounding like a clueless grandmother, I watched as Sena gave me a disbelieving look and frowned. She seemed to almost want to ask me, “How can you be in the game club and not know that?”

³ She uses the English version “puroguramingu,” which I guess isn’t that common.

“Even leaving aside the terrible contents of that STG the president made, from a design standpoint it was really solid, so I asked him how he made the game. And then, it really seemed like they were using some expensive software and equipment to make the game. So, that got me interested, and I came to take a look around.”

Sena seemed to be remembering back to that time, and blushed just slightly for a moment.

“When I went, I saw that they were much better equipped than I had thought... although everything was just scattered around and such a mess. So even taking into account some of the inconveniences I would have to tolerate, I decided that it would be worth it to join the club.”

Her reason was similar to the reason Kuroneko had given me. It seemed that this girl also joined the club to make use of the game-making tools that the club president had bought with his own money.

Kuroneko had definitely just used that reason as an excuse to hide her embarrassment.

But, in the end, was the same true for Sena?

The fact that she cleared that game meant that she was definitely a gamer.

But her appearance and actions just weren't otaku-like at all.

“That being said, I’m just at my limit.”

“Why?”

“Because I hate, hate, hate things that aren’t neat and tidy.”

There was quite an amount of force behind those words. Sena once again began to count on her fingers.

“Rooms being a mess or being dirty. People talking in the middle of class, or people who forget to do their homework, who skip out on cleaning duty, who can’t read the tone of a conversation, who forget to take out their trash on the right day, who are dirty and filthy, who cheese moves in 1-on-1 fighters, who cheat... I hate each and every one of these people who just go against the rules like that.”

I have a feeling that there were a few words in there that I had no idea about...

Hahah... just as her appearance would suggest, she was a neurotic “student committee chair” type character.

Calling her a diligent person would be an understatement. She might honestly be a full-blown clean freak.

“..... That’s quite admirable of you.”

“Thank you. But that’s why I just can’t take it anymore. Why do the people in this club seem so unmotivated? They went through all that trouble to join this club, but only a handful of them are serious about it. And then this room is so dirty. And I’m sure the president doesn’t shower.”

She used her handkerchief to pick up her cup, and took a drink of her soda. And then, she spoke in an incredibly glum tone.

“I... I really just can’t let it go on.”

Hm. In other words, this girl wasn’t just a high-strung student-committee-chair character, but she was also a fussy-wife character. When she saw something a bit off, she would get the sudden urge to fix it. What a horribly troublesome woman.

Back in elementary school, she was probably that girl who yelled at all the boys to clean up when she saw them slacking during their cleaning duties.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

It’s not like I could just tell her what I was thinking. So I made up something in the moment.

“I was just thinking how you really don’t look like an otaku. How do I put it... you just don’t seem like the type of person to join the Game Research Society. You seem like you’d fit in more if you joined the student council.”

“Is that so?”

Sena turned her gaze away from me, looking not altogether displeased, and pushed her glasses up with a finger.

“Hearing you say that puts me at ease. After all, I wouldn’t want to be grouped with the others in this club.”

Her words did annoy me a bit. Was it because I was already leaning a little bit towards the otaku side myself?

Also, I had heard something quite similar in the past. From none other than my own little sister.

And that’s what prompted my next question.

“Do your classmates know that you’re in the game club?”

“It’s not like I’m trying to hide it. Granted, it’s not like I go around bragging about it either... well, in my case, I really don’t think it would make a big difference if it were found out.”

“Really?”

How could she be so confident?

“But if they know you joined the game club, wouldn’t that be enough to make them think you’re an otaku?”

“I don’t think that’s true. If people ask me why I joined the club, I can just tell them that I wanted to study programming, and I feel they would understand that. Also, I might have said that I don’t want to be grouped with the other members, but to the very end, that’s just a personal feeling. And if you’re just worried about your public image, I don’t think getting seen as an otaku is something to be afraid about.”

“That’s quite a surprising thing to hear you say.”

I thought she was an otaku-hating clean-freak, but was I wrong? At least, the situation seemed more complicated than I had first thought.

Well, in any case, I won’t forget the rather rude thing she had said.

Sena seemed to fall quite deeply into thought, and then spoke in a somewhat cheerful tone.

“For example, there have been a lot of anime recently about girls who are actually closet otaku, but those stories are all just exaggerated. In reality, it’s very unlikely for someone to get persecuted just because they like anime or games. After all, we live in a time where people normally go to watch anime films, right?”

So in other words, she was saying that quite unexpectedly, society had already accepted the otaku culture, so you didn’t have to try so hard to hide the fact that you’re an otaku. When she put it like that, I guess I could see where she was coming from. I mean, there were definitely people in my class who didn’t seem like otaku but still talked about things like Evangelion. But still...

“But eroge and doujinshi are bad, right?”

“Yes, they really, really are.”

She half-lidded her eyes and seemed flustered.

“Because, I mean, you have to know your boundaries! It’s fine and good that you like what you like, but there’s a proper time and place for everything, and it’s really important for you to be able to figure that out. Really, really important.”

Kirino had said something similar. That was actually the exact reason why Kirino had hidden her hobby from her classmates. Sena wasn’t hiding as much as Kirino was, but she still was tactful in how, where, and when she told people about her hobby. She drew a clear boundary line in the sand and didn’t show anybody anything beyond that line.

Indeed, her attitude as an otaku was pretty admirable.

Depending on who she was talking to, she would behave accordingly. And this wasn't dishonest of her. Rather, everyone behaved in similar ways in order to avoid conflict with other people.

"If you ask me, otaku aren't avoided because they are otaku. They are avoided or persecuted because they do things that make other people uncomfortable. Yes, for example..."

She continued, but with her attention clearly on the person sitting on my other side.

"For example, people who just act so pathetically regardless of the time or occasion are the worst."

"....."

She probably heard Sena, but Kuroneko didn't move an inch and just continued staring straight ahead.

T-This silence was suffocating.

Hmm...? Was this... was this my fault? Just maybe... juuuuuuust maybe...

Just maybe.

“Oh? I could have sworn I just heard a little animal who lives only by the approval of others say something.”

“.... Ah, Gokou-san, were you here? Your presence is so light that I didn’t even notice~~.”

“And who may you be talking about? Please call me by my real name, my real name.”

“As always, I just have no idea what you’re talking about. What’s this useless nonsense about your real name? Hey, Gokou-san, how many times do you plan to force me to tell you that you should be more serious about things?”

“Hmph, my real name is Kuroneko. My soul does not answer to my fake name.”

“..... I just don’t have the words to respond to something as ridiculous as that.”

T-These two...

“Do you two know each other?”

I swung my neck back and forth at high speed and asked that. And then...

“... Hmph, she’s the noisiest, most annoying person in our class.”

“... She’s the biggest problem student in our class.”

That’s how they responded. All the while, they both were giving each other rather unpleasant glares.

... What the hell? I had heard that Sena was a first-year like Kuroneko, but...

Hey, Makabe-kun, what’s the meaning of this? I turned my questioning gaze towards him, but he also seemed to have not expected this and was looking bewildered. Looks like he couldn’t come through when it mattered.

But I really had to stop this before it got out of hand.

I took a leaf out of Saori’s book and butt in to their argument, although I was pretty nervous about it.

“S-Stop it, you two. Don’t argue.”

“Hmph, we’re not arguing.”

“Yes, we’re not. This is a one-sided lecture, not an argument.”

Sparks flew in the air. It was the jakigan girl versus the stubborn student committee chairperson.

Geez... what am I supposed to do here?

It would be different if I could find some common ground and try to strike up a conversation around that, but even that might be asking too much of me.

At that moment, as if sensing the tight spot I was in, Makabe-kun added himself to the conversation.

“Gokou-san, Akagi-san, you two are in the same club now after all, so please try to get along.”

“... This may be stepping over my boundaries, but if you would allow me to speak freely, the fact that we are in the same club is all the more reason for me to say what I am saying. After all, this person has an incredibly bad reputation in our class. She talks and acts in a strange way, she’s antisocial even when people from our class invite her to hang out with them, and she has no manners... I’ve never seen such a poor excuse for a human being in my life. There’s even been a rumor going out that the reason she never eats lunch in the classroom is because she’s eating it in the bathroom.”

Hey, cut it out, won’t you?! Hearing that just makes me want to cry!!

“... Hmph, is that so? In other words, you find it distasteful that we’re in the same club? Well then, I’ll stop immediately. If possible, I’d like not to be in a club with the likes of *you*.”

Kuroneko stood up from her chair with a *clang* (a bit teary-eyed).

“Hey, wait wait wait wait.”

A bit flustered, I held Kuroneko’s shoulders back.

“Come on, calm down.”

“Yes, Gokou-san. I have no idea where this misunderstanding is coming from, but when exactly did I say that being in a club with you would be distasteful?”

Huh? Wait, what exactly are you trying to say...?

Sena put her hands on her hips, and looked straight at Kuroneko on my other side with a proud expression.

“Fufu, being in a club with you is also my chance to correct your behavior. So, really, I wouldn’t be happy if you quit either.”

A dead silence filled the air. After ten seconds had passed, Kuroneko started to mumble.

“... And who in the world asked you to do that?”

“If I were forced to answer that, I would say that I asked myself to do it. Let me just make clear that this isn’t an act of charity or kindness. I just hate and can’t stand people like you. So, to me, this is just a chance for me to correct a situation I find unpleasant.”

What she said was incredibly selfish, but I found that I couldn't blame her.

Our motives may disagree, but in the end, Sena and I were both trying to do the same thing for Kuroneko.

“.....”

This situation was just a ticking time bomb. All conversation stopped, and the atmosphere was shrouded in silence. And what broke that silence ultimately was...

Pbbttttttt.

What broke that silence was a most vulgar sound. And everyone immediately turned their eyes to what had produced it.

“Ah, sorry! I farted!”

The president cheerfully lifted a hand up and apologized.

“Y-You're the worst!”

Sena made a (><) face, and if looks could kill, the president would be long dead.

On the other hand, even though Makabe-kun would usually make some sarcastic remark when something like this happened, he didn't say anything here at all.

Just maybe, what had happened right now was the president's own way of breaking up an argument... maybe.

But that really smelled pretty bad.

Swshh. Makabe-kun opened a window and spoke up to Sena.

"But this is really quite troubling. I really thought that since you two had so many common interests, it would be easy for you two to talk and get along..."

"Common interests? Gokou-san and me?"

"Yeah, both of you are really great at games. You have different styles, but from what I could tell, your skill levels are pretty much on par with each other."

At Makabe-kun's words, Sena and Kuroneko gave each other suspicious looks. I had no idea exactly what Sena was thinking at that moment, but I could pretty much guess what Kuroneko was thinking – "Skill levels on par? With me?"

"... Makabe-senpai? Are you saying that Gokou-san is as good at gaming as I am?"

“Yes. Akagi-san’s ability to read her opponent is amazing, but Gokou-san’s reflexes are just godly. On par with the Matsudo Black Cat, really...”

“You’re definitely going too far there.”

Sena harshly rejected his statement.

“You think so?”

“Putting that person in the same category as a high schooler is just doing him⁴ a disservice. Makabe-senpai might think it’s alright to exaggerate in order to be considerate of Gokou-san’s feelings, but I feel that’s not a good thing to do at all.”

“Ahh... haha, sorry. You sure are serious about these things, Akagi-san.”

It seemed that Sena had quite a bit of respect for that particular gamer.

And because of that, it seemed that using that gamer in a comparison with someone she hated made her angry.

“.....”

⁴ There’s no gender specificity in the Japanese, but continuing to use “that person” would be weird.

Kuroneko just sat there and watched that exchange emotionlessly.

But hmm... if you wanted some common ground for these two, then in the end it probably would have to be games... that's pretty obvious considering we were in the Game Research Society right now, but shouldn't there be a way to use games as a starting point and get something going?

And it's not like getting into arguments was necessarily a bad thing. Even when Kirino and Kuroneko first met... or rather, I should say that each and every single time they saw one another, they would start fighting with each other. But when all was said and done, they would still play together and got pretty close. That was because both Kirino and Kuroneko wanted a friend with whom they could be frank about their feelings and not hide anything.

So, what about this case? Kuroneko had lost Kirino, and thus had lost her usual sparring partner. On the other hand, Sena was really stubborn, and seemed to not only have a big problem with Kuroneko's attitude, but also seemed set on fixing it herself.

Call it compatibility, or call it two gears locking well, but this might not be such a bad situation after all.

Part 10

In the end, Kuroneko and Sena didn't manage to spark a friendship with each other during the party. Given what happened, you could say that it was wrong of me to try and get Kuroneko to join the game club in the first place, but it was still a bit too early to make that conclusion. I would exhaust all our options before I admitted defeat.

The welcoming party was already over, and we were cleaning up the classroom afterwards.

Sena held a bulged garbage bag in one hand, and was busy ordering around the rest of the club members.

"Now now now, all you senpai, go throw out the trash please. Once you're done with that, you should feel free to go home first. I'll do the rest properly."

Sena smacked a hand to her well-formed chest.

She volunteered to finish cleaning by herself and let the older students go home first... it was a pretty admirable attitude to take as a younger student, but to me, she just came off as a nagging wife who was throwing her snoozing husband out of the living room to do her cleaning.

"Sorry, Akagi. I'm the guy in charge of this party, so I can't leave before the end."

The president was the one who had said that. Sena held a broom out to him.

“Alright, then you can help out.”

“Roger.”

The president took the broom. Next, Sena turned around to look at me.

“Hey hey, Kousaka-senpai? Why are you standing there looking so confused? If you’re planning to stay here, how about you help out a little?”

“A-Ahh. Sorry about that.”

This girl sure liked to be in charge. I hurriedly acted to follow her orders.

... But this might be a good opportunity.

Yes, indeed. Right now, the only people left in the classroom were me, the president, Kuroneko, Makabe-kun, and Sena.

Five people I could put my trust into.

And if the situation were like this, then my trump card would be easy to play as well.

“You seem like you’re pretty busy, so Gokou-san, you can leave too.”

“... I’m not busy today. So I can do what I want.”

Sena and Kuroneko. The atmosphere hanging between those two was dark and gloomy.

Back then... from their very first meeting, Kuroneko and Kirino had hit it off, but that was because they could clash with each other without holding anything back and could come to a mutual understanding. And of course, Akagi Sena was not Kousaka Kirino. She wasn’t, but I still thought it wasn’t unreasonable to use Kuroneko’s experiences with Kirino as a reference for helping her make otaku friends in the present.

So, then... using that case as a reference, the problem here was obviously that Sena was no Kirino... that is, that unlike Kirino, Sena had no desire to open up her heart to Kuroneko.

In short, she wasn’t being true to herself.

..... If things continued like this, there wouldn’t be any progress.

If I wanted to get things moving, then I would have to offer some support.

“Hmmm... well, I guess there are some things I could try if I had to...”

I didn't think the things I had in mind would go so well, but at the rate we were going nothing was going to happen at all.

So I would try to do what I could.

Well then... geez, my heart is beating pretty fast. I couldn't help but remember back to that time.

I walked closer to Sena while cleaning up, and resolving myself, I casually struck up a conversation.

"Hey... you know..."

"What is it?"

"You said earlier that you joined this club so you could study programming, but does that mean you don't like playing games?"

"That's not true at all... I like playing games. More or less."

"Thought so. If you didn't like playing games, it just wouldn't make sense for you to be so good at them."

"Why are you being so indirect? What exactly are you trying to say?"

Ah, so she noticed. I scratched the back of my head, and looked just a bit away from Sena as I answered.

“Just a while ago, you said that if other people asked you why you joined the game club, you would tell them that you joined to study programming, right?”

“Yeah, and what of that?”

“It’s just that, in that context, it really feels like that wanting to study programming is just an act you put on for others.”

I took a quick glance at her eyes.

“Is that not the case?”

Sena bit her bottom lip ever so slightly, and seemed to fall into thought for a bit, but in the end she gave out a sigh.

“Ahh, it seems I said something I shouldn’t have. Well, that’s fine. The truth is that it was just hard to say, and there really isn’t anything I’m trying to hide. I’ll confess then... what I said was only half an excuse.”

“Half?”

What did she mean?

“... Well, in the future... I want to be a game designer.”

“Game designer? So you want to make games?”

“Yes. Umm, and, if possible, I want to find a job at a major game company.”

“And that’s why you’re studying programming.”

“... Well, yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

Sena turned her gaze away from mine. It seemed that she was still young enough to be embarrassed when she talked about her dreams.

I knew where she was coming from. I was the same, after all. I nodded with pleasant thoughts swirling in my head.

“Ah, I see. Then... haha, you don’t just ‘more or less’ like games.”

“You’re right. I’ll admit it, I love games. I love playing them, and I love making them.”

She blushed, seeming embarrassed at what I had gotten her to say. She was just too cute when she acted like that.

My next question ran as follows:

“Have you ever played ‘Homoge Club’?”

”THAT GAME IS AMAZING ISN’T IT?!”

.....

..... Damn, as I thought.

“P-Please just pretend you didn’t hear anything!”

“A-Ahh, but I did hear it. Clearly, with my own two ears.”

“Oooghhh....”

And for the first time since I had met her, I saw Sena break her composure. To explain, I had expected her response based on an inference I had made from two statements my classmate Akagi Kouhei had made a while ago: “My little sister is a fujoushi” and “My little sister is a first year and wears glasses.” She also bore some resemblance to her brother, and her hair color was the same, so I couldn’t help but think that I was probably right... and it seemed that I had hit the nail on the head.

“..... W-What are you saying all of a sudden? I-I-I-I have no idea what you’re babbling on about.”

As one might expect, Sena calmed down and returned to her senses after taking a single deep breath, but there was a certain someone who had seen a crack of a chance to attack this impregnable student committee chair, and I was sure that person wouldn't let that chance escape.

"..... Oh my, how unexpected. The diligent student committee chair has that sort of hobby?"

"Please listen to what I am saying, Gokou-san. I definitely do not have that kind of hobby."

"Then why do you seem so shaken? Why did you say what you said? Kukuku... isn't it because everything is completely true?"

"No. I told you, you're wrong... taking pleasure in other people's pain... what a horrible personality you have, Gokou-san."

Sena retorted with something rather insulting, but she had chosen the wrong sparring partner.

"How happy that makes me feel. Thank you for your kind compliment."

See? This girl was completely aware of what she was doing.

"..... Ooghh..."

Sena looked back and forth between me and Kuroneko with an annoyed expression. I was sure that she was trying hard to figure out how someone like me could possibly know her secret.

Oh, well, you know, your brother just went on and on about your hobby even though I never asked him to...

... Is something I couldn't say, so I just stuck with silence.

Kuroneko smirked, and it honestly was a rather unpleasant smirk.

Kuroneko being Kuroneko, she was probably thinking about ways she could use this to ridicule Sena.

I was the one who had lured her in like this, but she was really taking it admirably well.

... But still. To think that it would come to this... I felt a prickle of guilt run through my chest.

And I had thought that I would try and make the situation right, but...

How was that even possible when she yelled it out so loudly like that?

Kuroneko slowly licked her lips, and began to whisper demonic curses into Sena's ear.

"I may not know very much about that culture, but I do know that Maschera's been pretty popular there lately."

".... A-Ah... M-Maschera? That culture? What do you mean?"

"Cerberus, Astaroth, Lucifer, Shinya.¹ The handsome male characters, with their dark and aesthetic view of the world. You see them used in BL master-and-slave settings quite a lot.² Maybe it's a protagonist that is born out of a 'union' between two fellow males, or more than anything else, the delicate love-hate relationship between Shinya and Lucifer... these are all just direct hits on rotten minds³, and continue to spread little by little even though the anime has already finished airing, yes?"

"No, what are you saying? I have no idea. Please just cut it out."

"... Hmph... you don't have to play dumb, you know? After all, I'll bet that you're one of those types who worship and daydream about the Shinya x Lucifer coupling, are you not?"

"YOU FOOL!"

¹ Literally translates to "late night." As in, "it would have to be pretty late at night and I would have to be pretty drunk before you caught me watching this show."

² BL stands for Burmese Llama. Really. You don't have to look it up.

³ Most likely a reference to "fujoshi," the first character of which means "rotten."

Uwaah! Sena just opened both her eyes wide and shouted that out.

“If we’re talking about Maschera, then a Luci/Shin heroic seme x tsundere uke pairing is a sure thing!! And of all things, you want to reverse the pairing? Hmph, that’s absurd. Doing something like that would warp the characters! You make it sound like you know everything, but you don’t know a thing at all, do you? I hope you sink into hell right this instant. Y-You damn amateur!”

4

W-What the hell was this woman?! I thought she was calmly denying everything, but then she suddenly snapped!

... What? At what point during that conversation did Kuroneko bring the wrath of the fujoshi down upon herself?

I looked around for help, but the president and Makabe-kun were just standing there and blankly staring at us.

And after being yelled at by Sena like that, Kuroneko began to grin.

“Of course I know what I’m talking about. That when it comes to that couple, switching left and right is ridiculous. But... it seems I’ve caught a fool.”

⁴ She actually uses some 2-chan slang here, but it basically translates to “amateur” or “beginner.” Also, if you didn’t understand, I’m not explaining the rest of that paragraph. Go away.

“... Hya-?!?!”

Sena covered her mouth.

Kuroneko looked at Sena with a smile on her face, as if Sena had let out some big secret, but I honestly had no idea what these two were talking about.

It was even more mysterious to me than the anime otaku chats that Kuroneko and Kirino had.

Each and every word they said seemed like it was in a secret language. It was almost as if they were trying to make themselves difficult to understand on purpose.

“Hng, you tricked me, didn’t you...?!”

“Whatever may you be talking about? Hmmm... but this is quite troubling. To think that you could act so arrogant even though you had such a peculiar hobby like this. How very *improper* of you. Are you sure you can still talk about other people?”

“Yes I can! Unlike you, I’m well aware of the fact that my hobby isn’t something I should just air out in public! Yes yes yes, I admit it! I love homos! I’m rotten to the core! ³ But I’m making sure to hide it and live my life normally, so isn’t that fine?!”

She got all defiant again all of a sudden. Did she forget that she’s in a school right now?

Her usual cool demeanor had flown out the window, and Sena blew steam from her nose in her excitement.

“..... Ah, is that so? And I wonder, would such a rotten-to-the-core Akagi-san even be able to get excited by half-live things like the Prince of Tennis musical?”

“Not even a problem! Not to brag, but I’m really flexible, you know. It could be real people, or 2D people, or even things that aren’t even alive, but once you pull at my heartstrings, it’s possible for me to fantasize about them all I want in my head. In the worst case scenario, as long as I know who’s the fork and who’s the spoon, that’s enough for me to imagine the love scenario.”

“What impressive conviction you have... so, that means that you fantasize about real boys as well?”

“Hmph, I have nothing to hide. Just last night, I had a dream that Makabe-senpai was being gang raped by all the other game club members.”

This girl is insane.

³ Most likely a reference to “fujoshi,” the first character of which means “rotten.”

Her face remaining emotionless, Kuroneko asked her a question.

Even for Kuroneko, who more or less understood fujoshi culture and was just trying to goad Sena into embarrassing herself, what Sena had said right now came as a shock. Her eyes widened, and a cold line of sweat ran down the side of her face.

“... Keh, that went beyond my expectations... t-to think you had so much evil hidden within you...”

Even Kuroneko probably didn't expect that Sena would be this abnormal.

Wasn't this girl supposed to be a clean freak? What exactly was she planning to do with that fork and spoon? ⁵

⁵ For those still confused, this is such a weird expression that I didn't want to localize it. Apparently, spoon is slang that refers to the uke and fork the seme in yaoi. God help us all.



Even the president, who was watching Kuroneko and Sena's argument from afar, looked really frightened when he said what he said next.

"H-Hey, Makabe... you sure drew in a really scary hentai into our club..."

".....(° Д°)"

Makabe-kun didn't respond, but just stood there completely dumbfounded.

And then, having spent the last few minutes spitting out her wild delusions in her excitement, Sena gave out an "Ah!" and seemed to come back to her senses...

-

**"GYAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"**

-

Sena's face paled as if she had just taken in all the despair in the world, and she let out a tremendous shriek.

If we were living in a manga, I'm sure that at this point, you would be able to see swirly swirls appearing on her glasses.

Cough cough cough cough cough...!

Sena held her throat as she coughed.

With her face completely red and her eyes filled with tears, Sena stood in front of Makabe-kun and began to desperately apologize.

“M-Makabe-senpai, you have it all wrong! T-This is a huge misunderstanding!”

“.....”

Makabe-kun didn't say a word in response, but I could just see the life draining out of him. Sena grabbed him by the shoulders and began to shake him.

“Uwaah! I-I'm sorry! I'm really sorry, Makabe-senpai! I'm so sorry for fantasizing about you and the president! I mean, seeing you respond to him with your retorts the way you did, I honestly couldn't see you as anything other than a tsundere! It made me really moe moe! I-I also thought that, maybe the president didn't want to graduate because... because he didn't want to separate from the person he loved!”

“H-Hey, stop it already! Makabe-kun looks like he's about to faint! Don't traumatize your club senpai more than you already have!”

“?! Did I seriously just go and blabber something disgusting again?!”

“Just stop it!”

“O-Oh my! My my my! N-Next time I’ll make it President x Kousaka-senpai!”

“You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?! If you keep on going with your fantasies like that, I’m seriously going to cry here! Seriously!”

I pleaded with her, tears in my eyes.

... Look! Makabe-kun looks like a lifeless husk right now! I now understood all too well what he was going through after having experienced it myself. Let me just put this clearly... being made the object of a fujoshi’s fantasies is just incredibly sickening.

“I’m begging you, just stop it! Please, for the love of God!”

“AAaaaaaaaaghhhhh! I did it again! J-Just kill me! Put me out of my misery!”

Sena covered her face with both her hands and shook her head quickly back and forth, wishing death upon herself.

In a way, I’m partly to blame for things getting to this point...

T-There was nothing that could save this situation anymore. Terrifying... so this was what a fujoshi was like...

Although, I really wanted to believe that she was just far and beyond the usual level of hentai... but in either case, I seriously have to give credit to Akagi. He is seriously amazing. If I had a little sister like this, I honestly might have already hanged myself.

A-Ah right, Akagi! He's probably the only person who would be able to get out of this situation!

I quickly took out my cell phone, and dialed out to Sena's brother to ask for help.

.... Riiiiiiing..... Riiiiiiing..... Click.

"What is it, Kousaka? Need something? I'm on my way to the next town over for a practice match right now."

"Your sister went crazy... what exactly should we do?"

"Just keep on telling her that she's cute and a good girl until she calms down."

"... Ah, I understand now. You're just as sick as she is."

What the hell?! As if I could do that!!

Like sister like brother!

“... Well, I’m putting your sister on the phone right now, so please just do something about her.”

“Alright, leave it to me!”

After I heard Akagi’s enthusiastic response, I approached Sena, who was still covering her face and shaking her head, and held out my cell phone to her. It honestly looked like I was offering food to a wild animal right then.

“H-Hey, your brother is on the phone for you...”

“O-Oo...?”

Once she heard the word “brother,” Sena seemed to calm down a little.

She took off her glasses rubbed her eyes and took the cell phone from me. She put the cell phone to her ear.

“... O-Oniichan?”

She muttered.

... Oniichan, huh?

Akagi might be in a similar situation as I am with my little sister, but it seemed that our relationships with our sisters were completely different.

“..... Yeah.... Yeah..... yeah, that’s right..... at club..... the welcoming party..... yeah.....”

Sena heaved up and down with sobs as she explained the situation to her brother. Her voice was filled to the brim with trust for the person on the other end of the call... for some reason, I felt a pain prickle in my chest. When it came to her brother, this girl seemed to drop all her defenses and let her fawning, child-like side show.

“... Alright, I’ll do that..... Thank you. Sorry, oniichan. Good luck with your match.”

Sena said farewell and hung up. She passed the cell phone back to me.

“.... Umm, I seem to have embarrassed myself...”

“Nah, that’s not...”

Well, no, it was sort of true... but it seemed that she had calmed down, so that was good.

Sena took a few deep breaths, and raised her head, seeming to have resolved herself.

“Umm... Kousaka-senpai? Are you... good friends with my oniichan?”

“I guess so. We’ve always been in the same class, so we do hang out a lot.”

“I see... hmm.”

I wanted to ask her why she asked... but before I could do that, she looked at the ground and gave an eerie chuckle. “Wuhihi...”

“Hey! You’re imagining something weird again, aren’t you?! Something incredibly disgusting, aren’t you?!”

I really don’t want a kouhai like this anymore!

Part 11

And after the curtain fell on that particular act...

After she was successfully calmed down (at least, that's what I guessed) by her oniichan Akagi Kouhei, Sena returned to her senses and blushed from ear to ear. She once again apologized to everyone.

"... I am very sorry. It's... it's a bad habit of mine to get carried away when I get excited."

She spoke in a gloomy tone, and it was obvious that she regretted what she did from the bottom of her heart.

I wasn't completely free from blame here either, and I felt bad about my actions as well.

"We got it. It was also wrong of us to lead you on like that. I promise that I'll never tell anybody about what happened here."

"..... I promise too."

"I didn't hear a single thing."

Makabe-kun and the president both cheerfully agreed with me. I took a quick glance at Kuroneko.

“You promise too.”

“..... Yeah yeah. I got it, I got it.”

She really seemed reluctant about it, but even if I didn't mention it, she probably wouldn't have told anybody.

Well then... with that, after a wild and stormy welcoming party, this one issue was settled for the time being.

But there still was no progress on the other issue of making Kuroneko friends.

At any rate, when I tried to help her out in that regard, it turned out that the target was a hentai.

I really had to go back and think long and patiently about all of this.

Part 12

When we finished cleaning up, we all went our separate ways from what had been a rather complicated welcoming party. Kuroneko and I left school together.

We did not talk to each other. We just continued to walk in complete silence.

I thought back to what had just happened between Sena and Kuroneko.

Thought back to the outrageous fujoshi side of Sena I had caught a glimpse of.

But that girl returned to her senses quickly, and was definitely ashamed of her actions.

And sure, Kuroneko and Sena had gotten into a fight, but it was different from that time Kuroneko had met Kirino. They just didn't seem to hit it off in the same way. In the end, Kuroneko probably thought of Kirino as a person with whom she was especially compatible.

Just because the situation was similar didn't mean the outcome would be just as good.

But this much was obvious... Akagi Sena was no Kousaka Kirino.

Just like Kuroneko wasn't a replacement for my now-gone little sister, to Kuroneko, Sena was no replacement for her now-gone friend. I shouldn't forget that. If I did, it would be disrespectful towards Kuroneko. Sort of like that time before when she got angry at me.

Nobody was ever anybody else's replacement.

I whispered something to Kuroneko as she walked beside me.

"... Sorry."

"... And what do you have to be sorry for?"

Kuroneko's response was painfully curt. Even though she was willing to be here at my side right now, it seemed that, as I thought, she still hadn't forgiven me.

I decided to be honest and admit it. Unfortunately, I wasn't the greatest talker, so I didn't really know how to put it... but I tried to put it as frankly and as sincerely as I could.

"I admit it. Not having my sister here is a bit lonely."

"I see."

I understood that now. Even if I tried to talk big, even if I didn't realize it myself, not having my sister here made me feel unbearably lonely. That's why, with Kuroneko having once called me "niisan" and behaving a bit like a little sister, I had begun to use Kuroneko as a substitute for my little sister. I would treat her like a little sister, do my best to take care of her, and in that way distract myself from my loneliness.

It was pathetic, really. And the fact that I really hated my little sister still hadn't changed.

But, no matter how much I hated her... or rather, maybe precisely because I hated her...

When she suddenly disappeared on me, I was impacted really deeply... I think.

I gave a long, deep sigh.

"Even though she was like that, not having her here really feels lonely."

"Yes, I see."

With that, the conversation dried up for a moment. Both in my whispers and in Kuroneko's mutters were contained feelings that couldn't be expressed in words... I'm certain that we were both thinking the same thing.

After all, both Kuroneko and I shared similar feelings when it came to Kirino.

We didn't try to meet each others' eyes, but just continued to mutter together.

"I... I am pretty worried about you, you know. Even after this, I'm going to butt into your business."

"Just do what you want. I already gave up trying to stop you."

"I just wanted to ask you one thing. Did you stop calling me 'niisan' because you didn't want me to look at you like a replacement for Kirino?"

"No. Don't you remember? When I first told you that I would stop calling you that, your little sister was still in Japan."

Well, now that I think about it, that was true.

"So, why did you stop calling me that?"

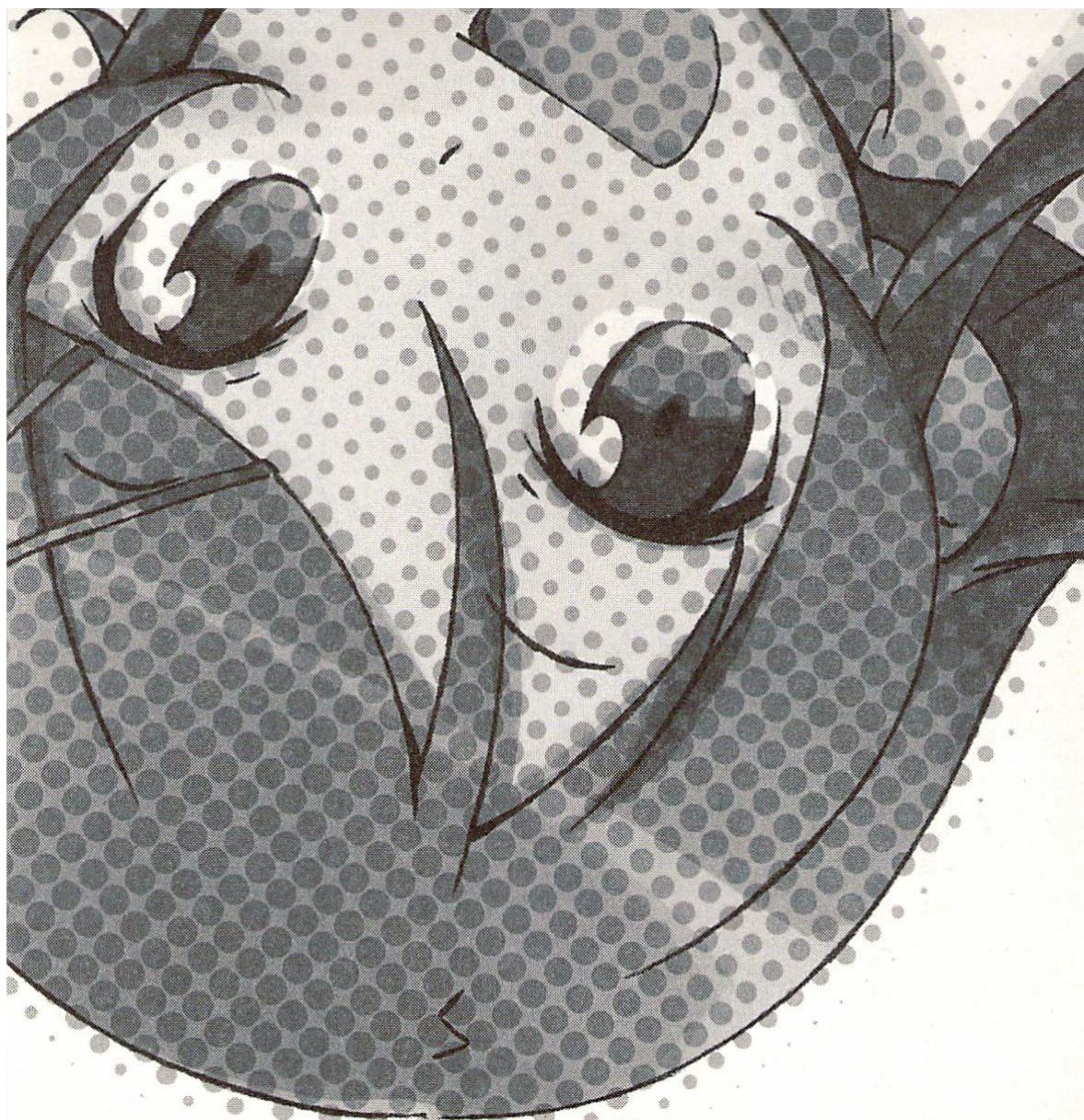
"No real reason. If I had to give an answer..."

"If you had to give an answer?"

"I just had a change of heart."

And Kuroneko didn't say anything more than that.

END CHAPTER 2



第三章

ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai⑥

Part 1

“The two first years are going to make a game together.”

Such was the president’s sudden declaration the day after the welcoming party.

It was after school, and we were in the clubroom.

Having heard what the president said, both Kuroneko and Sena shot glances at each other.

“Why do I have to...” “Why do I...”

They immediately voiced their objections together. Just as before, these two still didn’t get along.

On a side note, when it came to Sena’s little outburst the day before, everyone was just pretending it never happened.

“It’s a long-standing tradition here in this club.”

“... President Miura? You decided that just now, didn’t you?” “... If you would, please stop lying to us.”

Sena and Kuroneko both retorted. Why was it that women were so in synch only when it came to blaming others?

“Okay, that was a lie.”

The president readily admitted his lie. Ah, yeah, now I remember. Game club was a pretty unserious club.

There was no way they would have a policy that strict.

The club president gave a little ahem and cleared his throat.

“But, you’re still doing it. There are two reasons. First, we have to see what our new club members can do, and second, we want our new club members to work together well. More the second reason. When it comes to you two, there’s no doubt you have the skills, but it’s bad that all you do is argue with each other. So for me, that’s the first priority on the list of things to fix.”

“But...”

“Sure, we’re usually a pretty easygoing, carefree club. But compared to the other group members, you two really want to make games, right?”

Sena’s lips were thinned into a stern frown when the club president kindly asked her that question.

“And making games is a team effort. Got it?”

“..... I understand.” “Hmph.”

Sena reluctantly nodded her agreement. Kuroneko had her arms crossed and her face turned the other way, but she also didn't seem like she had any further objections.

Oooo... that's amazing... he managed to convince these two.

Rather than saying that he succeeded in making a logical argument, it was probably more that he sincerely understood what Kuroneko and Sena's goals were. He had said as much during the welcoming party, right?

That he wanted to create a club where anyone could study games, and anyone could work hard and make games with others.

“You two probably know already that next month, there's an online game contest. The Chaos Create contest, which is a pretty famous one. You two are going to make an entry into that competition.”

“You don't have to get too worked up about it if you don't want to. We won't be actively involved in the project, but if there's anything you don't understand, we'll try to help you as best we can.”

Makabe-kun smiled. He was probably trying to relieve the tension in the air a bit.

“Alright then,” the president began to conclude.

“So, in other words... you two, please bring a draft of a plan for the game you want to make by the beginning of next week. Ah, right, you two have been working on game ideas in club already, right? It’s fine if you use one of those too.”

“But I’m pretty sure Gokou-san and I were working on different games...”

“Well, of course we can’t make both. You two will bring your plans to club next week, and we’ll decide which plan to use with a majority vote.”

“... I see. A majority vote... by the members of this club?”

Sena took a glance around at the other club members in the room, which consisted of seven members, including me.

“That’s fine. I don’t mind that.”

“..... I also have no objections.”

It seemed that the two of them had agreed to the majority vote.

I had an idea, so I raised my hand.

“President.”

“What is it, Kousaka?”

“Can I help out with the games we’re using for that contest? I mean, I wouldn’t be able to help out more than doing odd jobs here and there... but hey, I’m a new member too, right?”

“Hmm.”

The president stroked the stubble on his unshaven face and glanced in my direction. Next, he flashed me his canines and gave me a knowing smile.

“That’s fine. Go ahead and try, comrade. Ah, yeah, I guess it would be a huge help if you took on the job of supervising these two.”

Part 2

After the club meeting was done, I headed for a bookstore in front of the train station.

Even as an amateur, now that I was going to help out in making games, I wanted to do what I could.

I had no idea how much I would be able to do, but I thought it probably would be a good idea if I read one or two books on making games. The books in the clubroom were all too specialized and difficult to understand, so I wanted to find something a bit more simple... an introductory text, or something like that.

Geez, I care so much about my kouhai, don't I? If my efforts this time bear fruits, then it'll make my cute kouhai adore me, won't it? He he he.

"Somewhere around here, then...?"

I wandered around the bookstore with a smile on my face, when I found a shelf that seemed to have the types of books I was looking for.

And then... there, I saw a face that I recognized.

"Ah, isn't that Akagi?"

“Hwaah?! Ah, K-Kousaka-senpai?”

The minute I called out to her, Sena jumped up in surprise.

She was probably also on the way back from school, considering she was in her uniform.

Considering her brother was also in my class, calling her by her last name was pretty confusing, but calling her by her first name was just not possible. So in my mind, I would call her “Sena,” while in real life, I would call her “Akagi.”

“Eh? Eh? Eh? W-What are you doing in a place like this?”

Was it that damn strange to see me in a bookstore? Well, I’ll give you that I definitely look a bit out of place in a store like this.

“Ah, well, I was looking for an intro book for game making or something like that.”

“A-Ah, I see.”

“This is good timing too. If you have any book you’d like to recommend, please tell me.”

“Ahh..... fuuuu.....”

Sena blinked with surprise as she tried to steady her breathing, and she finally seemed to calm down.

“Alright then. Let’s see... if you just want something that’s easy to understand for beginners, then I would recommend something like this.”

Sena took down one of the books on the shelf without a moment of hesitation.

“But easy books don’t really get into any of the finer details, so they’re honestly not too useful for making real games.”

“I don’t mind.”

Sena gave me the book, and I flipped through it, confirming that the material inside was just what I was looking for.

“Even if I went and picked up a more advanced book right away, I wouldn’t be able to understand a word of it. So this is enough for me.”

“Ah, I see. By the way, senpai, what changed?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I always thought that the thing Kousaka-senpai was interested in was Gokou-san, and not making games.”

Hey hey hey. It seemed that she had some weird idea about us.

It really wasn't like that. The president probably wanted to use this game project to deepen the bonds of friendship between you and Kuroneko. It's fine and all to be on board with that, but if I just let it go on by itself, nothing good would come out of it.

So I really had to follow along and make sure things went well.

"I do have a bit of interest in making games. And I'm also part of the team that's going to make this game, so it just wouldn't be good if you two try hard to make the game but I can only stand to the side doing nothing."

"But you know, cramming information like that overnight is going to be nothing but a hindrance to us."

Bam!

"T-That's a pretty blunt way to put it."

"Did I offend you?"

"Nah."

If something like that were enough to offend me, then I would have already burst a blood vessel in my head.

After all, I've heard much worse things said to me by a certain brute who lived in my house.

"In fact, it's helpful to hear that. I see, I see. Just cramming information... won't be useful."

I put a hand on my chin and nodded.

"Well then... I guess I just have to find something I can help out with."

"..... Kousaka-senpai sure seems to have a deep sense of responsibility. I'm surprised."

"It's not that surprising. I'm just a person who usually goes with the flow."

"Ah, I see."

This "Ah, I see" that Sena said seemed to be one of her favorite phrases to say. When she said it with her lips thinned and looked sulky, there was a certain charm about it and she was quite cute. But there were also times when hearing her say that just irritated me.

"By the way, did you also come here to buy game designing books?"

"Eh? N-No, not really."

For some reason, Sena seemed a bit flustered. Well then, what exactly did she come here for? But I didn't even have to ask.

Because it was pretty clear that the book she was holding in her hands was a BL book.

"... W-Why are you looking at me like that?"

Sena's face flushed beet red, and she quickly hid the book behind her back. It was a huge difference from my own little sister, who was so proud of her little sister eroge and bragged about them to my face. It was actually pretty refreshing seeing her like this.

"Hm? Ah, no, I was just thinking about how you sure like books like that."

"..... I know it's bad."

Sena cast her eyes to the floor, her face still completely red.

"Nah, it's not. I mean, it's not like you're buying 18+ stuff. I really don't think it's something you should be embarrassed about and try to hide."

"A-As I thought, Kousaka-senpai is pro-homo, isn't he?!"

"Why the hell do you always try to make me out to be a homo?! I'm a bona-fide hetero, thank you very much!"

“Oh...”

Don't look so disappointed, dammit. When I gave her a glare, Sena slapped a hand on her mouth and seemed to regret her words. “Ahh, I did it again...”

“Sorry... it's just that whenever I see Kousaka-senpai... that is... I just can't keep all these dirty fantasies from swelling up in my head...”

Taken out of context, you could really interpret those words as a crazy, pervy love confession.

“Whenever I see you, I just can't help but have BL fantasies <3” ... no, sorry, but hearing those words did not make me happy in the least.

“... W-Well, whatever.”

“Ah? You're fine with that?”

“No! Actually, I'm not at all!”

Look! She has a glint in her eyes! This girl is sick! Sicker than sick!

“Ooo.... getting my hopes up like that... that's not nice, senpai.”

“.....”

I'm stumped. I just don't know how to respond to that. Also, how is it that you've changed so much from my first impression of you? Who the hell are you supposed to be right now?

"H-Hey."

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to ask... are all fujoshi sort of like this? I mean... to be so timid when it comes to your hobby, or rather, to be so self-loathing... for you especially, it's strange that you're so self-assured usually, but only when it comes to your hobby do you seem to lose your nerve..."

"C-Come over here for a second..."

"Huh? H-Hey..."

Sena suddenly grabbed me by the hem of my shirt and pulled me to a corner of the bookstore.

She pushed me against the wall, and looked all around to make sure nobody was watching. And then she spoke to me in a panicked whisper.

"Hey... please don't say the word 'fujoshi' at a place like this..."

"..... S-Sorry. That was careless of me."

I sincerely apologized. Her large chest was also pushing into me right now, but this was no time for that. I had to think of something else and distract myself, or else this situation might start feeling weird.

But geez, what self loathing... did she really care about it that much?

I didn't have too many data points to go off of, so this might be my misunderstanding, but...

It's things like this that probably marked the difference between "fujoshi" and other kinds of otaku.

For example, even though Kirino was concerned for her public image and kept her hobby a secret, she still embraced her hobby and proudly considered it to be a part of herself.

In contrast, Sena was relatively approving of otaku culture and didn't think it was something you needed to be so desperate to hide, but when it came to fujoshi culture, she would stubbornly hide it from others and would be ashamed of it.

"I'll have you know, Kousaka-senpai, that the word 'fujoshi' was a word originally born out of self-prudence and self-derision."

Sena held up a finger, and began to talk in a tone you might expect from her if she were lecturing a younger brother.

“The fact that the words we use seem almost like a secret language at first glance, and the fact that it’s common for website administrators to put a lot of censorship marks on words is because we don’t want the pure, normal people to stumble into our territory. It’s a self-defense mechanism to prevent ourselves from being persecuted by the majority.”

Seeming to get more and more worked up as she went on and on, Sena drew her face even closer to mine... and her body pushed up against me even more. When you also considered the fact that she was a junior high schooler until just a little while back, this was a scary situation.

“Kousaka-senpai? Are you listening to me?”

“Huh? Ahh, yeah...”

It really wouldn’t be good if we stayed in this position for much longer. But it was hard for me to just tell her to stop... for many reasons.

“This is just my opinion, but... fujoshi culture was something that was built on the respect for each individual’s sense of values. So, you could say that if something doesn’t mesh well with my values, then I would quickly abandon it and distance myself from it. It’s probably not a feeling that Kousaka-senpai can understand, but even if we’re talking about a close friend, if their values aren’t compatible with mine, *they are my enemies.*”

I don’t understand. I don’t understand even a bit. Breasts breasts breasts.

“So, when you say ‘values aren’t compatible,’ what exactly do you mean?”

“An easy example would be the question of who’s a seme and who’s a uke.”

“I understand even less now!”

“Huh? Kousaka-senpai... don’t tell me that you don’t understand BL terminology...?”

“Don’t ask me that as if you’re shocked! I never had the least bit of interest in BL!”

“Ahh... hmm, well then, this might be a bit difficult for you to understand. Umm, well, the fujoshi culture is really an exclusionist culture... or rather, I should say that there are a lot of fujoshi who will refuse to participate in anything that isn’t compatible with their opinions. ‘One fujoshi’s moe is another fujoshi’s dismay.’¹ ‘Well, let’s make sure to put ourselves into different groups then.’ ... something like that. Whether or not it can actually be done is one thing, but I think that way too. Even if it’s another fujoshi, there are just things we might not see eye to eye on, and I know that in times like that I can easily turn into a pure ball of rage. And I understand that it’s not wise or appropriate to act that way.”

I think I got what she meant.

¹ I find it sorta miraculous that this rhyme can work in English too.

So, when she snapped at the welcoming party, that was why? “Pure ball of rage” was a perfect way to describe it.

And that time, Kuroneko knew that fujoshi were like this, and used that to her advantage to trap Sena, didn't she?

But most of all, Sena's explosive fit seemed to even surprise Kuroneko, although Kuroneko already knew what Fujoshi were like. What fujoshi were like, huh...? Fujoshi were restrained and self-hating.

“So, in other words... fujoshi culture is a culture of shame?”

“..... I guess you could put it like that.”

It seemed that Sena wasn't fully happy with that. Granted, it wasn't like I should be expected to be able to get to the heart of it after only learning a bit about it.

“So, all those unrestrained fujoshi characters that just blab about their hobby everywhere, the ones that have been coming out of all the light novels recently, those are just distorted misrepresentation of the male authors. Of course, that's a distortion that they use to make it more interesting, so it's not like there's anything wrong with that... it gives me mixed feelings. I just don't want people to read a work of fiction and suddenly decide that fujoshi must be like that.”

Wait just a second. From that reasoning, aren't you also a distortion? Just from what I've heard from you, I get the feeling that you're a pretty extreme hentai even for a fujoshi...

"So, you're saying that you want people to understand fujoshi better?"

"I don't care if they do or not. I just want them to leave us alone."

I see. What a self-loathing way to think. Sena continued in a rather timid tone.

"I mean... I can't puff out my chest and confidently say that we're not hentai... but still, it's not it's a hobby that we can practice out in the open... however, we're aware of that. So real fujoshi are a bit more tactful, I think."

"..... I see."

I remember that she said something similar at the welcoming party too.

That it's important to be tactful, that even though she tried to restrain and didn't like her own perversion, she couldn't do anything to stop herself from fantasizing. That whenever she got excited, she would accidentally expose herself. Would change into a complete hentai.

All Sena's troubles were probably rooted somewhere around there.

... Even when she started giving me this lecture on fujoshi, she got a bit worked up about it. Well, this is probably a good spot to try to get back to the main topic. What is the main topic, you ask? I mean, meeting here alone here is a pretty rare opportunity...

I think this is a chance to “capture” her.

If we’re using erogé as an example, this would be a spot where we would enter into a heroine-specific event.

This situation really seemed like that, considering we had met each other by accident outside of school. And, I mean, this is just information from games, but if I met her around another fifteen times, we would enter into an H scene.

“..... Kousaka-senpai? For some reason, for just a moment I got afraid for my life there...”

“It’s just your imagination.”

Not good, not good. It looks like otaku culture has been a bad influence on me.

And I might not be a fujoshi, but I have to keep myself in check here.

Alrighty then... what should I talk to her about?

“Hey, you know...”

“What is it?”

1. Do you get along well with your brother?

2. What do you think about this game competition you’re submitting to?

3. You know, your breasts were really pressing into me back there.

“Do you get along well with your brother?”

“Huh? Not at all!”

“Really? But your brother really comes off as a siscon if you ask me...”

“That’s exactly it! It’s so gross!”

Hey hey, where have I seen that kind of attitude before?

“Come on, Akagi-chan. It’s not good to talk badly about your brother, even as a joke.”

“Kousaka-senpai is awfully eager to have my brother’s back, isn’t he...?
.....*(whisper)* I-I see, so he really does love him...”

“I don’t love him at all!”

Even if you try to speak softly like that, I can hear you loud and clear! You’re not trying to restrain yourself at all!

“But if I remember correctly, at the welcoming party, weren’t you like ‘Thanks, and sorry, oniichan. Good luck on your match,’ or something like that?”

“Gyaahh!! Please forget that!”

She flushed beet red, and she gripped my collar.

Hahaha, I guess she really is different from my own little sister, seeing how much of a brocon she is. She’s sure not willing to admit it though.

Well then, let’s move on to option 2 then.

“What do you think about this game competition you’re submitting to?”

“What do I think... hmm, please keep this to yourself, but... I’m really looking forward to it.”

“And why exactly? Aren’t you pretty incompatible with Gokou?”

I saw a sparkle in Sena’s eyes.

“I mean, it’s a good chance, isn’t it? If I win at the first presentation, then we’ll be making my game under my guidance, right? It’s an ideal opportunity for me to show off my true abilities, and if we can make a good game and win a prize at the competition...”

“Yeah, if?”

“Then Gokou-san would also gain some self-confidence, wouldn’t she? ‘Ahh... even though I’m like this, if I do what Akagi-sama says, then I can live in harmony with those around me, and can create something good... thank you, ai rabu yuu,² you made all this possible~~’ ... something like that, right?”

Sena’s shoulders shook as she laughed. What a pushy woman...

This dimwit is seriously screwed in the head. There’s no way it was going to go that well.

² Yes, she says it in bad English, so I’m keeping it in bad English.

Can you even imagine Kuroneko saying “ai rabu yuu”? You know, I thought Sena was a motivated person with a lot of leadership potential, but at her core she’s seriously just a brat. But, I mean, she’s still definitely not a bad person.

Ah, right, now that I think of it, Sena was trying to reform Kuroneko, wasn’t she?

Kuroneko and Sena. To be honest, their compatibility with each other wasn’t really that bad. After all, they had similar hobbies, they liked similar anime, and as far as conversation went, they meshed well with each other... at least, more than Kuroneko meshed with Kirino. And after Sena’s secret was exposed at the welcoming party, they should have been able to get closer to each other. All they needed was another push, I think.

It would be nice if they could get along better during the gaming competition though.

“In any case, senpai is probably on Gokou-san’s side through all this. Just know that I won’t go down that easily.”

“You sure seem pretty confident.”

“Naturally!”

Haha. How Sena was acting right now was probably the very definition of “bubbling with excitement.”

Just seeing her like this was enough to get me excited as well.

Considering how our first face-to-face meeting went, I had honestly thought that I wasn't good at dealing with her, but...

Hey, she's a pretty good girl, isn't she?

And she wears glasses too.

Part 3

Both Sena and I headed for the register.

On the way, my attention was suddenly drawn to a hardcover lying face-up on display in the new releases section.

The title was “Maisora 2.” It was the sequel to the novel “Maisora” that my little sister, Kirino, had written.

... So this is already out?

I couldn't keep myself from sighing. Thinking of Maisora made me think of that time my little sister made me go out with her to collect data for her cell phone novel. I went with her on Christmas to Shibuya... and that was quite a hell of an experience...

I mean, there was the love hotel, and then the love hotel. Oh, yeah, did I mention the love hotel?

“What's wrong, senpai? Ah, that book... the sequel came out, didn't it...”

“You know this book?”

“I despise that book.”

For a second, I wanted to respond ‘Who the hell do you think you’re saying that to?’

But then I remembered. There’s no reason she would know that my little sister was the author.

I restrained the displeasure I was feeling in my heart from appearing on my face, and I asked her the obvious question. “So, why do you hate it?”

“The protagonist’s personality is just terrible... reading it just touches every single nerve in my body. There are definitely people who think differently, but, I honestly can’t see what could possibly be interesting about this book.”

“I-I see.”

After all, the main character was modeled after Kirino, right? So I can somewhat relate to her feelings.

“But it sure does sell well, this book.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah. I have no idea why, but there are a lot of people who like this book... but more than anything, it’s because they’re really good at advertising.”

Sena picked up a copy of “Maisora 2” from the display shelf, and showed it to me while pointing at the obi of the book.¹

“The second shot of a true love story, written by a girl still in junior high... well, I don’t know if it’s true or not, but it seems that a junior high school girl wrote this book.”

No, that’s definitely true.

“On the internet and on television, the ads that played up the idea that Rino-sensei is still in junior high school are pretty cleverly made. She never shows her face, but photos of her in her school uniform have been published, she’s done interviews, and before the book was released they put the full text of the book online so that people would talk about it and spread it by word of mouth... and there were a lot of other things like that. It’s not just because I read it and thought it wasn’t interesting, but from an objective point of view, the reason this book became a hit wasn’t just because of the ability of its autho... Kousaka-senpai?

“Hm?”

“What’s wrong? You look completely dazed...”

¹ Japanese novels usually come with an obi, which is just a thinner strip of paper wrapped around the bottom of the cover.

“It’s nothing.”

I was just sinking deeper and deeper into this pile of emotions...

That idiot of a little sister... she hasn’t contacted us even once, even though all her friends are worried about her...

They say that no news is good news, but there was still a limit to that.

Ugh..... geez..... what in the world is that girl doing these days.....?

Beep beep beep beep beep!

“She’s calling?!”

“Hyah?! W-What was that all of a sudden? Don’t just shout out like that please!”

Ignoring Sena’s protests, I rushed for my cell phone and checked the caller ID.

The name that was displayed on the screen was...

Part 4

“I’m sorry for calling you out like this.”

“I don’t mind. I actually had something I wanted to ask you too.”

The person who had called me was not Kirino, but was rather Fate-san.

Iori Fate Setsuna. She was a slender woman, and was wearing a pair of pantsuits.

I had faced this person before during a plagiarism incident involving Kirino’s cell phone novel.

In the end, that issue was resolved without major problem, and Fate never was turned into the police.

After I got the call from Fate-san, I parted with Sena, and had just now arrived at the café where she was waiting for me.

“Where did you get my number?”

“Kirino-chan told me some time ago.”

Kirino, huh...? Exactly what kind of conversation were they having such that my phone number came up? I couldn't even imagine it.

Hmm, also... in a sense, this person was to blame for Kirino going overseas.

After all, if this person hadn't locked her eyes onto Kirino, then Kirino wouldn't have been able to save up the money she needed to go overseas. It's not like it matters. Even if that weren't true, this is still not someone I wanted to meet. I sat myself down across from her, and she began the conversation.

"Can I call you Kousaka-kun? Or do you prefer Kyouusuke-kun?"

"I don't mind either way, Fa-"

Whoops. If I called her Fate, she would probably get angry.

But unlike before, she didn't get angry, but just gave me a casual sigh and a bitter smile in response.

"It's fine, whatever. Just call me whatever you want."

"Ahh, sorry. I'll go with Fate-san, then."

I didn't hold back and decided to call her by the name I had always called her by in my head.

“Umm, you said that you had something you wanted to talk to me about...”

But she seriously seemed completely different. I couldn't really put it into words, but she just seemed a lot less irritable and much more softer than she was before. I also felt I could hear a bit of difference in her tone while she talked...

“Yeah. Let's talk about that over a meal. Of course, today is my treat. Alright, Kyouzuke-kun. Just order whatever you want.”

.....

“W-Why are you talking like that?” ¹

When I asked her that question with fear showing on my face, Fate-san covered her mouth and her eyes widened.

“Ah, sorry. It's just that lately, I've been accidentally switching into my old way of talking. It's been a few years since this has happened too... I wonder if this is because I met you lot?”

You lot... she means Kuroneko specifically, doesn't she?

¹ Fate is using the first-person pronoun “boku,” which is usually weird for women to use. Kyouzuke is pointing this out.

Fate-san had come across Kuroneko, and had been reminded of herself from a long time ago. And once they had a lively back-and-forth with each other, Fate-san probably changed. Or rather, she probably returned to the way she was.

Although, a twenty-something woman speaking like that was seriously not good!

Was this person really going to be alright? Was she seriously fit to live in society?

“Umm... Fate-san. How have you been?”

“Lately? Hmm, well... my savings are running out, and I’m getting pretty panicked about it.”

“That sounds horrible!!”

“It’s not like I’m proud of it, but yeah, it is really terrible. I’m living alone, I have no family I can depend on, and I got fired from my temp job last year. I thought it was my last chance, so I spent all the rest of my money writing novels and didn’t even try to look for a job... it’s even hard for me to get a good meal. Even for this meal, I really have no choice but to use revolving credit on an ACOM Mastercard.”

This wasn’t something to laugh about. This was not funny in the slightest. Life as a wannabe was pretty tough.

Fate puffed out her rather modest chest, and for some reason seemed proud.

“To be honest, my annual income is 530,000 yen.”²

“That’s not something to be happy about!!”

It seemed that Fate-san had been laid off and now was struggling with poverty.

You couldn’t even counter her as a member of the working poor anymore.

It was a surprising state of affairs.

I pushed the button on the table and called the waitress over.

“No, please let me pay! Just eat something! It’s unthinkable for you to treat me!”

“... R-Really? Hm, sorry... this almost feels like begging...”

² Around 5000 USD.

No, you definitely were begging! Begging almost to the point of threatening, you were!

Do you really think I could let you pay after you told me a story like that?!

We gave our orders to the waitress who came over, and restarted our conversation.

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine, really. So? What did you want to talk about?”

“That little sister of yours... or rather, she was pretending to be your little sister that time.”

“You mean Kuroneko?”

“Yeah, her.”

I see. So she already knows that Kuroneko and I aren’t really brother and sister.

“I really wanted to give her my thanks.”

“Your thanks?”

“Yes, my thanks. Not my apologies, but my thanks. I’ve already said it to Kirino-chan directly, but... I still haven’t told that girl.”

I kept silent and waited for her to continue.

“I thought about what that girl said to me back then. They were naïve, painful... and incredibly nostalgic. How should I put it... it really was liberating, in a lot of ways.”

“A lot of ways, huh?”

“Yeah, a lot of ways.”

Fate-san gave me a smile. She didn’t seem to plan on going into any particulars of what she meant... but her expression was bright, almost as if she had gotten rid of her personal demons.

So, lured by her expression, I gave her a smile in return.

“I’ll give you her contact information. You should tell her directly instead of going through me.”

“... That’s true... yeah, I’ll do that.”

She shut her eyes and nodded.

Her actions gave her an air of maturity appropriate for her age, and I felt my heart unconsciously speeding up a little.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, nothing...”

Ooh, that was really close. If she wore glasses, it would have been all over.

We sat in silence for a bit, after which Fate-san changed the topic.

“You know, I heard that your little sister... Kirino-chan, I heard that she went overseas.”

“How exactly did you know that?”

“To tell you the truth, Kirino really pushed for me to be on the editorial staff for ‘Maisora’ and ‘Maisora 2.’ So I really had a lot of opportunities to talk with her. And one day, that girl just suddenly announced that she was going overseas, and it really surprised me.”

“Kirino really pushed for that?”

I didn’t know what was going on. This person was the person who tried to plagiarize Kirino’s cell phone novel, right? So why would Kirino let this person on her editorial staff?

“I couldn’t believe it either. But Kirino-chan said, ‘I was able to write this because of Iori-san’s advice. So I want to work with her to the very end in order to give something really good to the readers. Also, I really don’t want to have meetings with Kumagai-san alone.’ I thought it was really sweet of her.”

“.....”

No. Kirino is not sweet at all.

Especially when it came to her work.

She would let her passion carry her away, and I couldn’t see her letting someone onto her team that she didn’t think would be useful.

So, I’m sure that she honestly believed that she needed Fate-san’s abilities to make a better novel, and that Fate-san honestly had that kind of talent.

Perhaps Kirino had decided not to press charges against Fate-san also because she wanted to write a better novel.

After all, the person who had originally lured Kirino in and had worked on making Maisora the big hit that it ultimately became was Fate-san.

Even though she herself didn’t have the ability to write good novels, that didn’t change anything.

And in fact, I was sitting here because I also wanted to borrow that strength.

“Under strong encouragement from Kumagai-san, I’m going to be taking the mid-career recruitment exam for the Dengeki Books Editorial Department.”

“... Ahh.”

“I really don’t know how well that would work. I mean, considering I did what I did... and I doubt any novelist would want a failed wannabe as an editor... and I really don’t think I’m suited for an editor’s position.”

Bit by bit, Fate-san let out her true feelings.

“But... I guess... at this rate, I’m just going to starve to death...”

Even then, in the end she forced a smile onto her face.

“So I plan to do everything I can. To find something I can do and then to do it.”

I was seriously impressed by how cool mature, working adults could be.

“Ah, right, Kyouusuke-kun. Did you say you had something you wanted to ask me?”

“Ah, right right. To tell you the truth, I’m making a game for a school club right now...”

(Explanation omitted.)

“... And so, I really want those two first-years to get along. And, I think if they make a game together, and they can win a prize in the contest, then it would be a good experience and even a good opportunity for them to open up to each other.”

It was basically the same thing that Sena had suggested before. I honestly thought she was an idiot after I heard her talk about that, but after thinking about it long and heard, I saw that it did make some sense.

Combining your strengths and facing a challenge was a good way to deepen the bonds between people.

And if they could then emerge victorious from that challenge, it would be even more effective. So...

“I really want to do whatever I can to help them place in the contest.”

This person had experience producing real hits and real results, to the point where even Kirino acknowledged her abilities.

Novels and games were different fields, but she might be able to offer me some insider tips.

“If that’s what you want, then I guess there are a few things I can tell you.”

“Really?!”

“P-Please don’t get your hopes up too much... I’m really not that familiar with games. Umm, I really don’t think I would be able to tell you anything that wasn’t already obvious.”

“I don’t mind at all. Please continue.”

“I see. Well then... how about you try and be a bit more careful of what genre you’re going to submit to the contest?”

“Genre?! ”

“Y-Yeah, I mean, this ‘Chaos Create’ contest... they judge games by genre and give awards by genre, right? So, depending on what genre of game you submit, how difficult it is to win a prize might increase or decrease. So how about you go through the past prizewinner data from this contest carefully, and figure out both what genres have the highest chance of winning prizes, and whether there are any trends you can see in the popular games?”

“I see... I understand! I definitely remember that the ‘Chaos Create’ site had that kind of past data, so I’ll try and do a bit of research!”

That was a good idea. Fufu, I can feel myself getting pretty fired up.

“I-I see. So I hope I was a bit useful then?”

“Of course. I’ll bring it up in club tomorrow. So, in other words, it’s like this:
We have to be careful about what genre of game we make...”

Part 5

“Let’s make an erogel!”

The next day at club meeting, I wasted no time in announcing that marvelous idea.

“Huh?! W-Wait just a second! Kousaka-senpai, are you insane?! Don’t just start spitting out wild delusions!”

Sena’s reaction was frantic. I sent a calm glance at Sena as she stood there and steamed.

“Hey, don’t get so upset. Please allow me to explain.”

“I honestly can’t see how anything you could say would change my mind here though...”

“Just listen. This contest that we’re submitting to, this ‘Chaos Create,’ works by choosing winning games from each game genre, like RPG or STG. And of course, there are genres with more submissions and genres with fewer submissions. So the popular genres would be harder to win, while the unpopular genres would be easier.”

“I see. So it’s like how in the Olympics, you could say that the minor sports are easier to win a gold medal for.”

“It’s more like wannabes going out of their way to aim for the easy amateur competitions.”

“T-That’s a bad comparison!”

Really? But I was just repeating exactly what Fate-san had told me.

“Anyways, there’s no mistake that there are different probabilities for winning different genres, so naturally, we arrive at the genre we should aim for.”

“... Yeah. So? Y-You mean, that is... so the genre we should aim for is...”

“Yes! The 18+ Adult Game genre!”

Swish. I put on a cool smile and thrust my finger at Sena’s face.

You probably have guessed it already, but my internal switch had already been flipped and I was in my super-excited mode.

Sena clanged up out of her seat, and thrust her finger at my face in return.

“Even so, how in the world did it get to the point where we should be making eroge in club?! Senpai, you’re really more of an idiot than I thought!”

“Eh? But the idea makes perfect sense, doesn’t it?!”

“Hey, how can you stand there looking so sure of yourself? Someone please say something to him!”

Sena turned around and looked for some support. But the club president just stood there with a full smile on his face.

“Well done, comrade! I never thought about it like that!”

“This one’s insane too!! I-Is everyone in this club a hentai?!”

Wait, no, however you think about it, you’re the biggest pervert here. I was about to say that, but then I realized...

When she said that, she had completely naturally counted herself too...!

“M-Makabe-senpai! Makabe-senpai understands, right?! You understand what the problem is here, right...?!”

Sena took Makabe-kun by both shoulders and began to shake him back and forth strongly. Makabe-kun looked at a bit of a loss.

“A-Ahh, yeah, sure...”

“Hey, come on, can you idiots hear me?! I’m trying to talk reason right now!!
C-C-Come on, Makabe-senpai, tell them!”

“Well, about Kousaka-senpai’s idea, I understand why he’s saying that we should aim for the 18+ genre, and that there would be little harm in transitioning to that genre. Whether it’s Gokou-san’s game or Akagi-san’s game, if you just add an H-scene to them, then they become 18+, so you could still use the games you’ve already been making.”

He paused for one beat.

“But either way, that means we would be getting girls to write H-scenes, wouldn’t it?”

“Ah, yeah we would be.”

I agreed nonchalantly.

“Hentai!! Hentai!! Hentai!!”

Sena hurled criticism at me with her face completely red. She was so worked up that her glasses were completely fogged over in white.

“C-Calm down.”

“Do you really think I could calm down here?! Y-You’re trying to get your kicks by shaming kouhai girls! It’s sexual harassment! No, it’s a sexual power play!”

“Don’t be so outrageous! It’s not sexual harassment at all. F-For example, if I told you to write H-scenes and include the guys you know, then you’d write them happily, wouldn’t you?”

“I would write them with all my heart... n-no, that’s not it! W-What are you making me say?!”

She was sure easy to trap like that.

“A-Anyways, enough about me! Alright?!”

Sena turned to Kuroneko, who was sitting next to her.

“Also, Gokou-san must not like this either, right?! So please talk to this sexual harasser! Tell him you’ll curse him to death, in the way you usually say it or something!”

I gradually came back down to earth as I watched how seriously Sena was flipping out.

... I really thought this idea would have worked. Hmm... was it really impossible...?

However.

Kuroneko, who had been completely silent up to that point, took a position that far differed from what Sena and I were expecting.

“..... If senpai tells us to do it that way...”

Huh? Was it really ok?

I really had thought that she would respond like Sena said and would threaten to curse me to death...

Kuroneko's eyes watered and she blushed red right down to her ears. She began to mutter while deliberately avoiding my gaze.

“... The game I'm making now, it wouldn't take too much to add that in... so I can do it if you want.”

“G-Gokou-san... are you serious?”

“... If all it takes to increase our chances... is to add on a scene...”

Sena was a bit taken aback at Kuroneko, who was clearly embarrassed but was being very prudent.

“I-I guess that’s true, but...”

“It’s just, I’ve never drawn a scene like that with boys in it... so unless I try to do it, I won’t know if I can or not.”

I see. Now that I think about it, all the H-scenes that Kuroneko has drawn have only had girls in them.

She probably had the motivation but not the confidence. So I spoke as responded as sincerely as I could.

“If that’s the case... then I’ll help you as much as I can too.”

“... Eh? Help with...”

Kuroneko suddenly stopped midsentence and stood up, banging her hands on the table.

“K-Know your place, you idiot... w-w-why do you think someone like me... would lower myself to such... to such shameless human customs...?”

“Y-You! What kind of crazy misunderstanding are you having right now?! I didn’t mean it like that!!”

I just meant that I would read the H-scenes that you write, and give you my impressions as a male erogamer! This is definitely not some ero doujin, with a guy saying “fuihi, well I’ll give you some material to draw” or something!

Kuroneko stood there with her eyes closed tight and her fists clenched, obviously in a sour mood.

“I absolutely refuse. That’s not going to happen.”

And then, right next to me, Sena was waiting to launch another lecture, her glasses still fogged over.

“From now on, I’m going to call you sexual harassment senpai, alright?”

Her icy cold smile struck me right through the chest.

Part 6

Leaving all that joking aside...

It was lunch break on the day when Sena and Kuroneko were supposed to present their games. As usual, I was studying in the library with Manami. We sat facing each other across a quiet table near the window, and our notes were open. For me, lately I've been having trouble finding the time to even eat lunch. And I really couldn't thank Minami enough for coming along with me like this.

"Thanks, Manami."

"Eh? Eeeh~? What's wrong... going like that all of a sudden..."

"What? Can't I thank you without looking strange?"

"Ahh, ahh... well, I guess so..."

Sitting across from me, Manami gave me a shy giggle and blushed.

"Kyou-chan... I've always thought you were kind, but I get the feeling that you're getting even kinder lately."

"Don't be an idiot, Manami."

But, she might be right.

I had always lived while relying on the people around me. And I had been aware of that for as long as I could remember... but at some point I got used to it, and began to take it for granted.

And this was one of the causes of my own laziness.

Then, I began to think that I really needed to do something about myself.

And the person who got me to think like that... although it annoys me to admit it... was a certain someone who was no longer here. For her, considering how much she didn't like Manami, this was probably a pretty irritating outcome.

“By the way, Kyou-chan.”

“Hm?”

“Those first-year girls have been looking over here for quite a while now...”

Now that she mentioned it, there were a few girls who were just staring fixedly at me. And what's more, when I made eye contact with them, they would give out a “kyaa!” and run away panicked.

“Hmph, I’m sure they just think I’m too cool so they can’t stop looking at me.”

“I don’t think that’s what it is...”

“Hey...”

That hurt, you know.

I glared at her with narrowed eyes, but Manami just cocked her neck to the side and spoke in a slightly confused tone.

“I mean, those girls, they saw Kyou-chan and were saying something about ‘sexual harassment senpai’ or something.”

“A-Ahh... I wonder what they could possibly be talking about... hahaha.”

Dammit! That bastard Sena! She went around and told people, didn’t she?!

Well, this did make us even, so I didn’t have the right to complain... but God dammit.

Ugh... I’m sure that after this, I’ll never get confessed to by a cute kouhai anymore...

Of course, the chances of that happening were microscopically small in the first place, but still...

Part 7

A bit after we started studying, I took a look out the window.

The deserted-looking space behind the school building was dotted by a few lonely-looking benches.

“... Ah.”

But I saw someone I recognized sitting on one of the benches. Kuroneko was there, eating her lunch by herself.

... The sight didn't seem out of the ordinary at all.

But that's exactly what made this scene tug at my heartstrings. She couldn't find anybody to eat lunch with her when lunch break came, and found it even hard to stay in the classroom... she didn't want anybody to see how lonely she was.

So finding no other choice, she went behind the school building where nobody could find her and ate there.

“Kyou-chan? What's wrong?”

“... Nothing.”

I didn't want to show Manami what was happening, but unfortunately, she had already seen the pitiful sight out the window. She gave off an awkward "Ah..." like I had done just moments before.

Seeming to not know what to say, Manami searched for the right words, and finally began to mutter hesitantly.

"... Umm... her bentou box looks really pretty though."

There wasn't really any point in those words, but when I took a good look, Kuroneko's lunch was quite something.

What was quite something, you ask? Well... she was eating a *Meruru Bentou*, wasn't she...

She was using a bentou box from "Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru," the anime that Kirino had liked, and the side dishes were arranged to look like Meruru. But putting aside the intricate appearance of the bentou, it seemed like a handmade lunch with low nutritional value.

Was she really going to stuff herself with that?

"..... Also, why exactly is that girl eating a Meruru bentou?"

She always just went on and on about how much she hated it, and argued all the time with Kirino about it.

Did she just convert when I wasn't looking?

... Then, I realized that I was staring at Kuroneko as she ate her lunch.

Ah, not good, not good. She probably didn't want to be seen like this either.

I shook my head back and forth, and broke the magnetic attraction that was tying my gaze to that spot.

When I did that, I saw Manami collapsed on the table in front of me with her arms stretched over her head.

Considering Manami always had the correct posture, seeing her like this just didn't feel right.

"... Why exactly do you look so depressed?"

"... Hm? I'm not..."

"Liar. That's obviously not true."

I pressed her for answers with a glare, and...

"..... Ooo..."

I could see Manami's round eyes water through her glasses. Perhaps she gave up on trying to evade my questions, but she let out a sad sigh and began to mutter.

"Sorry for making you worry... I'm just... I just hate myself a bit right now."

"... Let's take a break then. So? What do you mean you hate yourself?"

"... Sorry. That's a secret."

Well, that was unexpected. To think that I would ever hear the word "secret" come out of her mouth.

I really was quite surprised, so I asked my next question in a bit of a teasing tone.

"Hm, so this mysterious thing that's bothering you, you can't even tell me?"

"..... Actually, I can't tell you exactly because you're Kyou-chan."

"What?"

"..... Nothing."

She seemed saddened and turned her gaze away from me. That really hurt. I really couldn't leave this alone.

I scratched my head with the hand that wasn't holding a pen.

"Hey, well, I understand then. You don't have to tell me what's bothering you. But in return, tell me what you want me to do. If it's something I can do, I'll do anything. I mean, it's not like there isn't anything, right? I can't help thinking about it now. If you want me to get back to studying, ask me to do something. Come on."

I spilled everything in my mind to her. To my embarrassment, my tone had gotten pretty desperate through that speech.

But it seemed that my embarrassment was worth it. A faint smile returned to Manami's face.

"... Thanks... umm, can I seriously ask you to do anything?"

"Of course. Men don't go back on their words. Give it your best shot."

"... Well then... ehehe..."

Manami picked her body up, clasped her hands in front of her mouth, and seemed a bit embarrassed. A blush appeared on her cheeks.

"I want Kyou-chan to tell me the type of girl he likes."

"H-Huh?"

What is she saying all of a sudden? Ugh... normally I would just evade the question and leave it unsettled... but this wasn't a situation in which I could just give some vague answer and get away with it.

"So... you just want to know the kind of girl I like?"

"... Yes... I want to know."

I had already said that men don't go back on their words, so I had no other choice. I had no choice but to puff out my chest and say it proudly.

"I like girls who look like Ayase."

"A-Ayase-chan?! N-No, there's no way! No way no way no way! No matter what you say, Ayase-chan is just impossible!"

"Don't reject that idea so strongly! I know just as well that there's no way! That girl really hates me, after all! But, I was just telling you honestly what kind of girl I liked!"

What was with her? Wasn't she being just a bit cruel?

Seeing my eyes fill with tears, Manami panicked and waved her hands back and forth.

“N-No! T-T-That’s not what I meant...! Ahh, I-I see... so Kyou-chan likes girls who are like Ayase-chan...”

“No, I was just talking about appearance. In terms of personality, I like a different type of girl.”

No matter how amazingly cute she was, did you really expect me to go out with a girl who wanted to report me to the police at any given moment?

“A-Appearance? S-Soo... what kind of personality do you like?”

“Well, I guess it would have to be a personality like yours.”

I answered honestly. I had promised to be honest, after all. When I did that, Manami pointed to herself and her eyes widened.

“M-Me?”

“Yes, you. After all’s said and done, when it comes to the girls I know, I get along with you the best. We’ve been together for a long time, we really know each other, and I don’t feel like I have to be reserved around you. It just feels comfortable when I hang out with you... so wouldn’t it be reasonable to call that the type of personality I like?”

Why was I spewing out such embarrassing things in a public space?

“I see... a personality like mine... ahh, I see...”

“... Are we done? Can we get back to studying?”

I’m never saying that again.

Part 8

“Hey, you first years. I’m making an entry into the contest this time too, so prepare yourself!”

It was after school. We were just about to begin the presentation session when the club president said that.

“And of course you’re causing trouble once again...”

Makabe-kun sighed. Next, Sena asked a question with a somewhat puzzled expression.

“The president is also entering the contest? But separately by himself?”

“Yes. Hmph, we’ll be sparring partners through it all, so come at me with all you’ve got.”

Or something like that. Considering it was the president we were talking about, while he was busy motivating the first-years, he probably started wanting to participate himself. Makabe-kun looked at the president with half-lidded eyes.

“If you don’t do the same genres though, you can’t directly compete with each other, you know. So... what kind of game are you planning to enter into the contest?”

“Megidoraon II. The sequel to the game I was using for a club entry test.”¹

“Well, there’s no way that’s not going to be a shit game.”

“W-We won’t know until I make it, right?!”

“Not really. From the beginning of time, there’s no example of a game that was a shit game but had a sequel that wasn’t.”

“What do you mean?! I could improve like they did with Dragon Quest 2!”

“I would bet that it’s going to improve more like Cheetah Man 2.”²

“Why are your insults so harsh?! And why the hell are they all references that can only be understood by the idiots who go on Nico Nico Douga?! Dammit! Someone say something to this guy!”

The president was dripping with sweat and looked around him, but there were no club members who came to his aid.

¹ See the footnotes in Chapter 1-8 in this volume.

² From Know-Your-Meme: Cheetahmen II is an unreleased Nintendo Entertainment System game developed in 1992 by Active Enterprises. This game is literally “unfinished”, parts of the graphic objects are missing and uncolored or just plain invisible. It’s widely known as being virtually unplayable because of bad programming, and its music has been the subject of many remixes and MADs on Youtube and Nico Nico Douga.

“Ooo... that’s way too cruel! What the hell did I do to deserve this?! Alright, fine! I have other games I’ve been making too! So I just have to design it better and that’ll be fine, right?!”

Nah, probably not. That wasn’t exactly the problem that Makabe-kun was trying to point out...

“President, I want you to imagine in your head the ideal, most fantastic game you could possibly imagine.”

“Hm? Ah, like this...?”

“I can tell you that’s already a shit game.”

“Wha?! Y-You...! Wha... what are you saying...”

Makabe-kun was just merciless! He just cut him down right there!

“Anyways. It’s fine and all if you want to enter the contest too, but just don’t get in their way.”

“Tch, you have no faith. Well, whatever. Let’s start the presentations.”

The president said that, and Sena stood up first.

“Let’s go from my plan first then. Everyone, please direct your attention to this screen over here.”

She spoke with a nice and clear voice.

Sena started up a projector that she seemed to have prepared in advance, and her game materials showed up on the white screen. Each time she clicked the mouse, the slide show went through screens filled with things like rough character illustrations, story summaries, and explanations of her game’s concept.

The two chubby club members clapped their hands and whistled. They seemed to have completely converted to being Sena’s fans already. Although, Sena seemed to be the most uncomfortable with this and she frowned.

Those two were probably going to vote for Sena... it was a bit of an unfavorable set of circumstances for Kuroneko.

Well then, onto Sena’s game...

I wasn’t happy about the fact that *every single one of her characters was male*, but it seemed like a medieval fantasy RPG. The club president widened his eyes a bit.

“You... you can draw?”

“I’m pretty terrible at it though. But I thought putting illustrations in would make it a bit easier to understand.”

She seemed pretty great at it to me.

Like Kuroneko, this girl also seemed to be pretty multitalented. These gaming company hopefuls were really quite something. Sena began to boldly explain her game, brimming with confidence.

“Well... the game I want to make is a dungeon crawler RPG!”

“So... like Wizardry or Etrian Odyssey?”

Makabe-kun asked that question. Sena gave him a smile, and responded cheerfully.

“Yes! Compared to Dragon Quest or FF, Wiz really enjoys a deep-seated popularity with gamers even though it hasn’t changed much from the original. And if you ask me, that’s because there is still a lot of the primitive, original appeal of RPGs packed into Wiz.”

Sena placed one hand on the table and leaned forwards, raising up one finger on her other hand for emphasis.

“That is, character creation, role playing, and searching for loot... those are things that are even a part of why MO and MMO games are so fun... for example, Monster Hunter applies those ideas well and is a big success.”

“... Nobody cares about your theories on RPGs. Just tell us how exactly you plan to incorporate that ‘primitive appeal’ into your game.”

Kuroneko butted in with an insulting tone.

But Sena just puffed out her chest, as if saying “Glad you asked!”

Hm, her breasts sure are big.

“Indeed. Well then, allow me to reveal the concept of this game.”

Sena clicked the mouse, and the image being projected onto the screen changed.

“The game I want to make will be an RPG that specializes in game balance and pacing. Lately, the big RPGs have so many high-budget movies and huge world maps that it’s impossible to compete with those in those ways no matter how hard we try. But if we pay attention to the things that modern RPGs are beginning to lose, then we can see a light at the end of the tunnel. If I can optimize the game balance parameters, like the strength of the enemies, the encounter rate, the item drops, the enemy movement patterns, the experience points you get, the strength of magic attacks, the cost of inns, the ease of getting equipment or healing items... then we can bring out the thrill of barely making it past battles, the happiness of getting your hands on a new piece of equipment, the feeling of accomplishment and improvement you get when you put that new piece of equipment on... ultimately, the most important thing is that the player feels like he or she is part of the adventure. And I’ll build everything in the game in order to allow the players to experience that joy.”

“Along those lines, it’s true that Etrian Odyssey was able to put that kind of idea into practice and make a pretty good RPG for the cell phone, even though the cell phone has far lower capabilities than console machines.”

“Indeed! Of course, that’s not enough for a game to catch on, so I’m going to use a modern-styled story and light illustrations as hooks. It just wouldn’t do to forget that the game has to give a good first impression so people will actually pick it up and play it.”

Hmm, I didn’t understand too much of what she was talking about, but she definitely seemed to have thought everything through.

At that moment, Makabe-kun spoke up.

“I understand where you’re coming from when you say that an RPG that focuses on game balance could be fun. But, aren’t you limited by how much time you have to make this? The more carefully you want to make the game, the more time you have to put into it.”

“No, that’s not a problem, Makabe-senpai. If we’re making a dungeon-crawler RPG, we only need one town map, and we also don’t need a world map. And although it would be better if we included them, it’s not entirely necessary to have graphics of the different weapons and armor either. Just think about the original Wiz game. Even that was more than enough... rather, it was really good, don’t you think? I also said that we would use some modern-style light drawings, but if we’re smart about it we won’t have to draw that many. Taking this to an extreme, we could honestly make a good RPG without any graphics at all, and only rely on text and the programming. And what’s more, if we do it like that and cut out a bunch of things, then the

tempo of the game goes up as well. And isn't a game that just goes at a smooth pace like that stress-free and nice?"

"You say that, but... getting the game balance to be that good is easier said than done, you know?"

The president voiced his concerns. But Sena just gave back a bold smile and pointed at herself with her thumb.

"Fufufu, not to brag, but I'm really good at dealing with finicky things like game balance. I'm confident that I can work the game balance better than the staff at major game companies."

"Well that's a pretty bold statement... you sure have a lot of confidence in yourself."

"You may have your doubts still, but let me hand out a trial version of the game alongside some production materials. You should make a judgment after seeing those. All the graphics are still pretty shoddy since I was the one who drew them, and the dungeons have not been designed past 5F, but it's definitely a good game. Also, let me just emphasize that *there are no bugs*. So, I mean, if I can get this far by myself, then I really don't think there's much of a reason for Makabe-senpai to be worrying about time constraints."

"Hmm."

The president cocked his head to the side and grabbed his chin.

“It’s not bad at all. What do you guys think?”

He opened it up to the rest of the club. The first person to respond was Makabe-kun.

“It looks pretty good. You know, back in elementary school, during lunch breaks, I had the habit of drawing grids in my notebook and using my pencil as a die³. So I can see where Akagi-san is coming from.”

“A self-made TRPG, huh? Yeah, definitely, I’ve done that too.”

... Now that they mention it, I’ve played like that before as well.

I had friends who created their own games in their notebooks. They would come up with really ridiculous setups and roll dice...

We would chat while adding and subtracting from our health bars with a pencil and eraser.

If you talk about the primitive appeal of role playing, you were probably referring to something like that.

³ By which he means, he drew numbers on the multiple sides of his pencil and rolled it. This isn’t something that I see done in the West a lot, so I felt compelled to footnote it.

“Fufu, I guess we’ve already pretty much decided to go with my plan then.”

Sena smiled bashfully.

Just like Sena said, there were murmurs of approval here and there about her plan.

It was to the point where the contest almost felt decided already.

“So Gokou-san’s presentation is next.”

Makabe-kun turned the topic to Kuroneko.

But even though she probably heard him, Kuroneko didn’t respond whatsoever and just continued to sit there.

“Hey, it’s your turn.”

“... I-I know.”

It seemed that she really was nervous. She was rigid, like that time we had gone to that publishing house.

Kuroneko stood up stiffly, almost seeming like a marionette.

“... W-Well then... umm... I’ll show you my plan now... please make room around the projector.”

“Alrighty, please do your best.”

Kuroneko brushed Sena aside, seeming irritated, and put up her production materials up on the whiteboard. She also took out a thick stack of production materials from her bag, and began to distribute them around.

“... What’s up with this thick stack of papers...?”

“... They’re obviously production materials.”

..... As I thought.

Even when it came to making games, this girl’s habits didn’t change much at all.

Compared to the materials that Sena had handed out earlier, these must’ve been five times as thick.

Kuroneko made sure that everyone had a copy of her materials, and began to mumble softly.

“... I want to make a visual novel.”

“Wow, that’s a fairly orthodox genre.”

The president made a rather safe response. On the other hand, Makabe-kun seemed concerned about the time constraints like he did before.

“Have you thought about how long you want it to be?”

“... I was thinking that the game would take around five hours, and there would be three routes.”

“Three routes? ... Even if there’s a common route, that’s going to take quite a bit of work.”

“That’s pretty hard, I think. Wouldn’t it be better to cut down on the amount of material?”

“I agree. We don’t have that much time to make these, so we should make getting this game done our first priority, and in that case, I think it would be safer to make it a one-route game with no branches.”

Kuroneko and Makabe-kun’s conversation was followed by a few other voices of dissent.

Every time that happened, Kuroneko began to respond with a “Ahh, that is...” but ultimately couldn’t say anything and just stayed silent. She looked back and forth between the people asking her questions and her production materials, and seemed to be attempting to make an appeal. But if she couldn’t put that appeal into words, it wouldn’t get across. She had completely shrunk back into herself. And she couldn’t form words very properly.

This was bad. This didn’t feel like a presentation at all anymore.

Geez. Why was it that this girl could argue so fluently with Kirino like that, but at important moments like this couldn’t do the same?

“Wait just a second.”

Seeing no other option, I tossed her a life raft.

“If it’s about time restrictions, I’m sure we’ll figure something out. Right?”

I looked towards Kuroneko and urged her to respond, and she finally managed to form a proper sentence.

“... Yes, I don’t mind if I get a bigger portion of the workload.”

“You may say that, but there is definitely a limit to how much just one person can do.”

The president said that. He had created a couple games himself, so there was definitely persuasive force behind his words.

But I knew. I knew how quickly Kuroneko could draw manga, and that she had even written a few novels, so when it came to pacing, there was no issue.

That's why I puffed out my chest, almost like I was talking about myself.

"Just tell them. Tell them how quickly you can work."

"... If we're talking about text, I can generally write 6 kilobytes every hour."

I had no idea what that meant, but it was pretty amazing, right? ⁴

"... Certainly, if that's true, then we won't have any issues with making the scenario."

When I saw how impressed Makabe-kun seemed to look, I gathered that it was pretty amazing indeed. I continued with my line of reasoning.

⁴ Do we seriously measure text in kilobytes now? Why can't we just measure it in words like normal people? Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go buy a bushel of milk and a quarter log of cereal.

“And according to my investigations, visual novels are pretty popular and separated pretty finely into different genres, so the number of entries gets pretty scattered between those genres. Because of that, this might be a genre to aim for if we submit something to Chaos Create. Picking Gokou’s project would definitely be consistent with the plan to go for victory, don’t you think?”

“... And what exactly are you trying to do? ... Are you trying to back me up?”

“Don’t be an idiot. I’m just giving my objective opinion.”

I turned back to everyone else and clapped a hand on Kuroneko’s shoulder.

“This girl can also draw manga. And what’s more, she’s really fast at it, and she draws really well.”

“... W-Why do you look so proud of that...?”

Well, you’re not really giving a presentation here, so I have to do it in your place and look proud for you.

“Everything I’ve said is true.”

“... I’m really nothing special.”

Don't be so shy in the middle of a damn presentation. You have to assert yourself more! You know, like you always do.

The president watched our verbal exchange, and grabbed his chin.

"And you definitely can write the script too?"

"... Yeah."

"Hahaha, that's pretty amazing. I mean, if that's the case, you could probably make the entire thing yourself if you had the time."

The president was in high spirits.

Kuroneko looked at the ground and spoke with a gloomy tone.

"I've always studied games assuming I would be making them by myself... also, please don't make too much of me. Let me just make clear that just because I can in theory do everything from start to finish, that doesn't mean that I'm confident that I can do each and every part well."

"I already said it, didn't I? Games are made with teamwork. There's no way we would let you do everything yourself."

The president flashed his teeth at Kuroneko and smiled.

“Exactly.”

I smiled at Kuroneko. When she saw me do that, she moved her fingers around restlessly and quickly turned her back to me.

“..... Hmph.”

“Well, from what I heard, it does seem we would be able to make it in time.”

Sena butted in. Her lips were thinned and she seemed sulky.

“But I wonder if this game would turn out to be any good. I mean, just look at this setup... it’s not like I’ve read through all of it but... to be frank, it seems really one-sided.”

“... But with your proposed game as well, you had no female characters.”

Yup, that was incredibly one-sided.

“S-Shut up! We’re not talking about my game right now! Also, who exactly would want to buy a game with such a gloomy, heavy setting? And there’s so much specialized vocabulary that I just get so confused. I really think that the game would be better received if you did a lighter story to appease the lighter gamers.”

“That’s true.”

And in a quite unexpected turn of events... Kuroneko readily agreed.

“See? So if that’s the case-“

“But this is what I want to do.”

Kuroneko upturned one corner of her lips. It was an incredibly wicked smile, one that fit her to a tee.

I felt a chill go up my spine. I recognized this feeling. This was...

“You know, a certain friend of mine once read one of the novels I had written.”

... Yes, this was that.

“She told me that my novel was nothing more than self-serving masturbation.”

“But isn’t that quite good advice there? She just wanted you to think about your audience a bit more, right?”

“There was also another time. That same person turned to me and told me, ‘you’re really an idiot, but let me just tell you that the most important thing in making something is that the creator wants to do it and is having lots of fun doing it. If you can’t even do that, then there’s no way you can make something good. Hmph, don’t you think that’s the ideal all creators should strive for?’”

“Y-Your friend sure has a pretty obnoxious way of putting things.”

My God. Who in the world was talking so big to my kouhai like that?

“But in either case, what she said seems to be correct.”

“Yes, exactly. Creators shouldn’t forget about their audience, should find something they would have fun making, and that’s the ideal that creators should strive for. It’s so right it almost makes me want to vomit.”

H-Hey. You...

“But that only applies for people who can make what they want to make and then find a way to sell that work with only small adjustments. What do you do if you make what you want, but then find that you’ve gone completely off track of what people want? If you sacrifice yourself to make what the players want, then you’re just a suck-up, but if you make what you want, you’re self-serving. And you will never be able to achieve that ‘ideal’ or whatever that you speak of.”

“Well yes, I admit I don’t really know how to answer that.”

Good grief. But the one Kuroneko was talking to right now was probably not Sena.

Rather, she was probably talking to the person on the other side who had once spat those words out at her.

“You know, I really, really hate those people who can just have fun like that and make things. I can’t help resenting them and just getting frustrated. To the point where I just want to strangle them to death.”

“... That would be just a pointless crime...”

“So what?”

“So what, you say...”

“Hmph, it’s not like I’m going to go out and seriously kill them... in fact, the things that those people make are really quite wonderful, and many people wait eagerly for them, myself included. It’s not something you can handle so casually with just a pointless crime.... However. Even then... don’t you feel like you would like to teach those people a lesson? And I have the will-power to try and do just that.”

Kuroneko gave a mysterious chuckle, looking like she was recalling an incredibly fun memory.

"I thought about it... thought about what I should do to beat those people down. How I could act to make them rue the day they looked down on me and kneel at my feet."

I've honestly never seen anyone as rebellious as this girl.

But I wonder... why was it that even though her words were pretty pointless, when Kuroneko said them, she came off as pretty charming?

I stifled a smile and asked my next question.

"Well? What was your conclusion?"

"There are two options we are left with. One is to get as close as we can to that ideal and come into constant conflict as we try to achieve balance. But the other... the other is to revolt."

"Revolt?"

"Yes. To revolt by not giving a damn about their so-called 'ideal.' If we do that, then there's no more conflict to have, right? Self-serving? Masturbatory? I could not care less. I'll just let the people who want to say that say it all they want. Meanwhile, I'll just do what I want, when I want it, and how I want it done. After all, to me, the doujin market is precisely the place for us to whip out works which are a hundred percent self-serving. If you think our masturbatory games are boring, then I'll just have show you some amazing masturbation!"

“What the hell are you running your mouth off about?!”

“.....”

Kuroneko had been going on and on vigorously, but at my one sentence she suddenly returned back to her senses and flushed from ear to ear. But she summed it up thusly:

“... So that’s the concept for the game I want to make. I’m fully aware that it sounds self-centered, so if you want to reject my proposal then please don’t hesitate to.”

And then silence filled the room.

A silence that was all the more suffocating for how long Kuroneko had continued to talk.

“Alright! You two, good presentations. Nice work!”

“President, should we start the vote?”

At Makabe-kun’s question, the president put up three fingers.

“Nah, let’s do it thirty minutes later. These two went through a lot of work to prepare these presentations, so let’s take a quick look at their production materials and game samples before we make a decision.”

“That’s true. Well then, we’ll take a vote in thirty minutes.”

Now, everyone was going to take a look at Kuroneko and Sena’s presentation materials, but just as before, Kuroneko’s outlook was bleak.

After all, Kuroneko’s materials were as thick as always and incredibly difficult to read.

Sena’s materials even included a sample game, and just seemed like the real deal.

... This really was hopeless...

Part 9

Thirty minutes later...

It had finally become the time to choose whether we would be going with Sena or Kuroneko's plan.

The president looked around at everyone and raised his voice.

"Well, first off... those who think that Akagi's plan is the best, please raise your hands."

.....

.....

...

Nobody. Even the two chubby guys who seemed like big fans of Sena didn't raise their hands.

"Wha..."

As expected, Sena was completely lost for words. She had stood up with a clatter, but couldn't seem to grasp the situation and just stood there stock still.

"Well, next, those who think Gokou's plan is the best, please raise your hands."

This time, everyone raised their hands. Me, the president, Makabe-kun, and the two chubby guys... five votes in total.

"Well then, the game that the first years will make together will be Gokou's game."

Bang!

"Wait just a second! What in the world is the meaning of this?!"

Sena had finally shaken off her paralysis, and banged on the table. The president awkwardly scratched his cheek.

"Well, it's just what it looks like."

"B-But this is crazy! That is... I mean... I was pretty moved by Gokou-san's presentation too, you know? I was pretty moved, but... zero votes... was my plan really that much worse than Gokou-san's?!"

Sena was raging, and I could almost see the steam coming out her ears. Considering how recklessly confident she was in herself, it was no wonder she was so unwilling to accept this outcome. She hadn't realized the fatal flaw in her plan.

Kuroneko stayed silent with her eyes closed, relishing Sena's stare.

And then... everyone, including me, turned to the president with expectant looks.

The president realized who everyone was staring at, and pointed at himself, almost as if asking "W-Wait! I have to say it?" And in response, everyone nodded in unison, giving him the go-ahead.

The president groaned painfully, and spoke to Sena in a sincere tone.

"... Umm, well you know, Akagi... your presentation was also really good."

"... Enough with the flattery."

"It's not flattery. When you finished your presentation, I honestly wanted to make that game. I thought that even if you lost the vote, I really wanted to see that game finished anyways. To be frank, if we took the vote thirty minutes ago, I was pretty sure you were going to win."

I agreed.

Kuroneko's presentation had some real spirit behind it... but like the person herself had said, there was quite a bit of selfishness in it. On the other hand, although I don't claim to be an expert, Sena's presentation seemed really organized, and I couldn't find any real flaws. She really made her plan sound interesting.

But even then, everyone ended up supporting Kuroneko's plan. Why was that?

"Are you telling me that those thirty minutes were enough to change your mind...? Was there something wrong with the samples and the materials I handed out? That can't be true. I spent so much time revising and perfecting them that I was sure that they were perfect..."

"I see. So you don't understand? Well, I guess I have no other choice then. Let me show you exactly what was wrong."

The president put a laptop on the desk and revived it from standby mode. One scene from Sena's sample game was on the screen. It was one of the "minimum required scenes" that Sena had been talking about.

The president spun the screen around so Sena could see it, and spoke in a gentle voice.

"For example... Sena-chan... what exactly is the meaning of this scene?"

"Huh? I mean... it's an event where the characters are at a regenerative hot spring having an orgy."

Sena said that in the most casual, natural tone in the world.

Of course, at this party, everyone was male.

“Don’t you think this place here where the monk is doing **** with ***** to the warrior’s ass is amazing?! And look at this one! This samurai and necromancer are in a really private really moe situation! I mean, relationships between openhearted warrior characters and really weak-seeming pretty boys are just irresistible, and just take a look at this! There’s even a **** on the Masamune blade! I was really looking forward to getting Gokou-san to do drawings of these too!”

“Hentai!! Hentai!! Hentai!!”

Just like a certain someone had screamed at me before, I screamed at Sena, my face red.

“You little...!! You call other people hentai and sexual harassment senpai and tell them off...! You say you’re using contemporary light illustrations and stories? What wild delusions are you under to be able to say that?! You’re way past going off the deep end... you’ve gone right to the bottom of a canyon! The game you want to make isn’t an RPG at all! It’s a complete homo game!”

“What are you saying, Kousaka-senpai? The game I want to make is a complete homo RPG.”

“What the hell is the difference?!”

“Nooo, they’re compleeeetely different!! By the way, the main characters were all based on the senpai in this club!”

“I thought so! This guy here with the word ‘whore’ tattooed into his buttocks is me, isn’t it?!”

“Ehehe.”

Why do you look so proud of yourself?!

Pant... pant... pant... pant... I couldn’t breathe, probably since I had yelled that out without taking a breath. I was damn near tears when I spat that out, you know.

“I-I’m going to call you sexual harassment kouhai from now on, got it?!”

This is by far the first time in my life where I have been so disgusted with a girl.

This girl probably couldn’t make normal judgments anymore once she got excited and flipped her switch. In that respect, she reminded me of myself. But seriously, how could she make the entire game and not come to her senses?!

“Y-Y-You... you’re trying to sexually embarass your male senpai, aren’t you?! No matter how good it’s made, do you honestly think you could get us to make such an unpleasant game?!”

“Are you... calling my work of art unpleasant?!”

She said something that reminded me of myself in the past... I honestly just wanted to crawl up into the fetal position.

I suddenly understood what Ayase must have felt back then. This was impossible. Just physiologically impossible. Just seeing guys intertwined like that with each other made me want to vomit, but learning that they were based on us made it even worse.

And then, she made every character incredibly tall and slender. I mean, seriously, that character that was based on the president looked nothing like him except for the glasses.

“Sorry, but that’s exactly it. So don’t be surprised that your plan didn’t get a single male vote. Sorry about that, but just give up.”

“..... Dam..... mit..... Ugh.....”

Sena got a bit choked up as tears rose to her eyes. Even though she had come to us with this kind of a game, she was pretty confident about it. So this all was probably pretty frustrating.

“So... you’re telling me... that we’re rejecting my idea... and that I should make Gokou-san’s selfish idea together with her? ... Is that what you’re saying?”

Seeing Sena looking so pitiful, I couldn't bring myself to pile on any more criticism.

The president spoke in my place.

"Exactly. Go with Gokou-san's idea and bring the project to completion. President's order."

"....."

Sena clenched and ground her teeth together.

The president looked unusually serious, and gave Sena a stern look.

"... If you don't want to do it, then you don't have to come to club anymore, you know? So what are you going to do?"

"Oo..... gnng.... Oh."

"Oh?"

"I'M GOING TO TELL MY BROTHER ON YOU!!"

By the time the ringing in my ears had subsided from that exclamation, Sena had already ran out of the room.

That girl... she pretended to be calm and collected, but when she got worked up she was seriously a complete child.

Makabe-kun got up to chase after her, but the president stopped him. "Just let her go, Makabe."

"Making games is a team effort. But despite that, she broke the club's rules and ran off. She probably knows better than anyone that she's being unreasonable and selfish. But even then, she can't accept what just happened, and was just too annoyed to continue talking civilly. That's probably why she ran off."

Sena also had things that Sena wanted to make. In that regard, she was every bit as passionate as Kuroneko.

So there was no reason she would bend and compromise so easily.

"..... Are you sure, president?"

"Hmph, I have great hopes in that girl, after all. She'll come back, and she'll have grown up so much that you won't even be able to recognize her anymore..."

This guy sure liked to try to sound cool in the most desperate of situations.

At that point, after having just sat there silently all this while watching the course of events, Kuroneko finally spoke up.

“..... She already ran off, so there’s no point in thinking too much about it. I’ll just do the game alone. All I have to do is finish the game and win a prize in the contest, right?”

No, that’s not alright at all. Didn’t the president already tell you that making games is a team effort?

If you don’t make it in a team, there’s no point.

But there was no reason for me to say that out loud.

Because...

“

Because Kuroneko already looked very unhappy about this situation.

Part 10

After that day, Sena stopped coming to club.

Makabe-kun had tried to convince her to change her mind, but it seemed that she had told him that she wasn't going to come anymore.

I'm sure that her reason for stopping wasn't just because her presentation lost.

Sometimes I almost forget... but that girl was incredibly ashamed of being a fujoshi, and tried to hide it.

And then she exposed that to all the people in the club. What's more, she exposed herself while looking really proud of it.

... And once she came back to her right mind, she probably wanted to die.

So it was understandably hard for her to come into club and act like nothing happened.

I even went to her older brother to ask for advice, but he seemed to be in a sour mood and wouldn't tell me much.

So this hopeless state of affairs continued.

My plan to make friends for Kuroneko seemed to have come to a standstill, but...

In the end, I had to do what I could. There was no way I could just quit making this game in the middle.

A few days later, in an unusual turn of events, I went back to my house alone with Kuroneko.

“Sorry to intrude...”

The uniform-clad Kuroneko took her shoes off in the entranceway and overly carefully arranged them on the floor. It was what she always did, but for some reason her movements seemed strangely slow today.

When she was finished arranging her shoes, she turned towards the hallway and her eyes began to wander around the room, as if she was looking for hints of others.

“Ah, nobody’s here but us.”

“... Yes. We’re here, just the two of us...”

She blinked a few times, and then tightly gripped her upper arm. She showed no signs of wanting to move from the entranceway.

She was acting suspiciously. I spoke up while scratching my cheek.

“..... Why do you look so nervous?”

“I’m not nervous.”

No, you’re definitely nervous. You’ve also been to this house so many times I’ve lost count already, so I really don’t see why there’s a reason to be nervous.

Ah, although, that’s not quite true. The situation right now was different than the situation up until now.

It’s only been quite recently that she’s started coming to my house not as Kirino’s friend, but as mine, and also... now that I think about it, this was probably the first time we’ve been in my house alone.

There was absolutely nobody else in this house right now.

Ah, I see I see. I usually don’t pay attention to it that much, but in the end she was still a girl, wasn’t she?

Well then, at times like these, I had to step up and be considerate.

“

Dammit, now I'm getting nervous... it's been a while since I've dealt with such an awkward silence like this...

"W-Well, anyways. Please come in."

"..... Yeah."

When I urged Kuroneko on in the brightest voice I could muster, she finally began to move.

But her movement became no less suspicious, and she hobbled forwards slowly, almost like some small animal.

".....Well then, let's get started right away."

Once we got to my room, Kuroneko began to talk without even giving me an opportunity to bring out some drinks.

Yes, this explanation might be coming a bit late, but Kuroneko had come to my house to work on the game together.

Let me just add on that it was Saturday, so we didn't have club meeting. Manami seemed to be busy, so we couldn't study together either. So don't get the wrong idea; it's not like I went out of my way to call Kuroneko over so we could be alone.

“Alright..... wait, what should I even do? Come to think of it, I never asked you that.”

“Debugging.”

“Debugging?”

“Yeah. You’re going to use that PC and play the game I made. I mean, I haven’t even finished half of it yet, but for now, you’re going to play the parts I finished over and over and over and look for any issues.”

“Hmmm... well, I think even I could do something like that.”

“It’s simple... but it’ll be hard work. This is just something that I wouldn’t be able to do by myself...”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

“... Yeah. Please. And also...”

Kuroneko looked right down at the ground.

“Also tell me what you think about the game... alright?”

She mumbled that and seemed a bit embarrassed about it.

Immediately after that, I installed Kuroneko's unfinished game onto my desktop PC (the one Saori and I had put together), sat at my desk, and began to debug.

On the other hand, Kuroneko had put her laptop on my bed – close to the pillow – and was lying there on her stomach. It was the usual position that she took when she worked in my room (it seemed to be the pose in which she could concentrate the most). Saori was usually here with us, so this must've been the first time she's taken that pose when we were alone with each other.

She looked so defenseless like that. It was probably a sign that she really trusted me, but to be honest, I couldn't help but feel uneasy about it.

"Hey."

"Huh?!"

She spoke up to me at the exact moment when I was thinking that, so I ended up panicking.

"... Do you have a minute? Could you come over here?"

"What is it?"

I got up out of my chair and approached Kuroneko's position.

If I let my guard down, I could feel my gaze wandering to the pure-white skin of her buttocks.

Kuroneko stayed upside down on the bed and briefly glanced back in my direction.

“That scene that I asked you about a bit ago... I tried animating it a bit. Could you take a look at it?”

“That’s fine with me. Here, give me your laptop.”

“I can’t. That would break my concentration. You should go to a place where you can see the screen.”

Saying that, Kuroneko scooted a bit to the side on the bed, leaving a bit of space beside her.

“A-Are you telling me to lie down next to you?!”

“You don’t have to look so restrained. It’s your bed, after all.”

“Don’t say something like that!”

Considering we were in a locked room, her telling me to lie down next to her almost sounded like she was seducing me. Of course, it wasn’t like that, but...

As proof of that, Kuroneko was staring at my panicked face with complete puzzlement.

“...? Why are you hesitating?”

“Why, you ask...?”

Also, isn't it weird that she was nervous until a second ago, but now that she's lying there she seems so relaxed...?

I honestly didn't understand her sometimes.

Seeing me hesitate more, Kuroneko's mood took a turn for the worse.

“What is the meaning of this? You can play an 18+ adult game side-by-side with your sister, but you can't play a normal visual novel with me?”

“W-Why the hell do you know about the one episode I want nobody to know about?!”

“The last time I talked with your little sister... she told me.”

I see.

So it was that brat's fault. The last phone call she made to Kuroneko... so she did it after that.

Dammit, that brat just had to go and run her mouth off. To think she would talk about me during her last phone call with her friend...

Even though they should have had plenty of other things to talk about...

When the subject turned to Kirino, our conversation suddenly stopped. Maybe it was because I felt my mood drop just a bit. At that moment, Kuroneko suddenly spoke up. Spoke up with a rare smile on her face.

“Niisan, would you like to play a game with me?”

“You idiot. My little sister would never say something like that.”

Geez. I gave out a resigned sigh, and sat right on the edge of the bed. I leaned my body forwards, and gazed into the laptop screen. Kuroneko's face was right next to mine, but even though she was a younger girl, I didn't feel nervous at all. After all, she was the same as Kirino to me.

She had no consciousness of the fact that I was a boy. And there was no reason for me to feel any desire towards someone who thought of me like that.

“Hey. This is fine because it's me, but you really shouldn't do things that might make other guys get the wrong idea.”



In this way, I relieved some of the tension in what was becoming a rather dark atmosphere.

And then, I tried to tease her a bit to see if I could provoke a reaction.

“Or what are you saying? Do you like me or something?”

“I do like you.”

“Wha-?!?!”

I was really surprised and whipped my head back to look at Kuroneko.

Kuroneko remained emotionless and continued to stare at the screen, but her small lips began to move.

“I like you... just as much as your little sister likes you.”

“..... Well thanks a lot for that.”

In other words, she barely registered my existence, huh? So that’s how it was... geez, I got surprised over nothing.

Part 11

“So? What do you think?”

“..... The story is..... really dark..... Reading it gets me a bit depressed...”

“I used Rosario Lombardo ¹ and Izanami ² as motifs. It’s a story about a boy who loves a corpse. Every night, the boy finds himself transported to the world of the dead through his nightmares, and looks for the soul of the one he loves in the Labyrinth.”

“Hmm... that description is too metaphorical and I can’t understand it.”

“I see. Well then, I’ll rewrite it to be easy enough for you to understand.”

“That’s pretty considerate of you. Are you sure? I’m... you know, a complete beginner... I really don’t understand much.”

“I don’t mind. That’s exactly why I showed this game to you.”

¹ Reference to a girl in the early 1900s who died of influenza and whose corpse was preserved via embalming and is currently being kept in the Capuchin Catacombs of Sicily.

² Reference to a one of the two original Japanese deities. Izanami died and her mate Izanagi went to the underworld to look for her.

“If that’s the case, could you do something about this really nasty bad ending too? If I were really playing the game I would seriously cry.”

“That’s an ending I wanted to put in no matter what, so I can’t do anything about it.”

“..... I see.”

“Yeah. Also, you can avoid that ending depending on the choices you make.”

“You said there were three routes, right? So there’s one with a happy ending, right?”

“None.”

“None?!”

She said that like it was the most obvious thing in the world! Geez, she completely surprised me.

And then, we each went back to our own work.

Time flowed gently onwards. We were in the same room, but we barely talked to each other and just went on working. It wasn’t unpleasant, and it wasn’t boring. Although, it didn’t make me feel at ease either.

It was a feeling that was incredibly difficult to describe.

When I had been working for two or three hours, I had more or less gotten used to this debugging work.

Then again, I had a pretty simple job. All I had to do was play the same scene over and over and over and tell Kuroneko when I found things like the game freezing or weird text being displayed.

... It seemed that making games meant doing similar things endlessly. You could call it monotonous or plain... but in either case, it was definitely hard work.

To be honest, was I really being of much use here? I was a bit suspicious...

Was giving me this job just Kuroneko's way of being considerate?

As I thought those rather insecure thoughts, I saw that Kuroneko was taking a break. She suddenly asked me a question.

"..... Hey..... senpai?"

"Hm?"

"'Senpai' or 'niisan' which do you like being called more?"

“Why are you asking me that?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just tell me.”

“Hmmmm... well.....”

1. I like “senpai” better.

2. I like “niisan” better.

.... Wait..... it’s not like I really have a choice of what to say here...

“Just go with ‘senpai.’ I mean, we’re not actually siblings, so calling me ‘niisan’ would be weird, I think.”

“..... I see.”

Kuroneko let out a mischievous chuckle, and her mouth warped into the shape of a crescent moon.

It was a smile I’d see her make when she was in a good mood. I’m not sure what the meaning of the question she just asked me was, but she seemed to be satisfied with my answer.

“I see..... well then, whenever we’re alone from now on, I’m going to call you ‘niisan.’”

“Why are you doing the opposite of what I wanted?!”

“Hmph, it’s more interesting that way, isn’t it?”

“You’re a damn vile woman!” ³

Dammit, she was planning to do that right from the start, wasn’t she...?!

I re-crossed my legs where I was sitting. Kuroneko mockingly laughed at me, and put one hand on the bed, crossing her legs. From that position, she reached out one of her black-socked feet towards me, and whispered in a falsely sweet voice.

“Hey, niisan? I’m pretty tired. Could you massage my feet?”

“Don’t spew nonsense!! What kind of image do you have in your mind of what a brother and a sister act like?!”

³ I admit, I was channeling Stewie from Family Guy a bit when I wrote this line. Please feel free to imagine him saying it in a British accent =D.

“Hm? But isn’t it true that in this household, the brother is the sister’s manservant?”

“Absolutely not!!”

At least, that’s what I wanted to believe!

Kuroneko shut her eyes and put her hands in front of her mouth, her back shaking with laughter.

This must be only the second time I’ve seen this girl having this much fun... or was it the first?

And in that case... well, I guess getting made fun of was worth it.

This girl really had a nice smile. She should show it more often.

Part 12

Through my and Kuroneko's efforts, progress on the game steadily moved forwards.

Today, like every other day, we had gone back to my room once school ended, and we were working on the game by ourselves. I sat at my desk, and Kuroneko was facing her PC, lying on my bed on her belly.

"Hey... Kuroneko?"

"What is it... niisan?"

"..... You know, lately we've been coming to my house to work a lot, haven't we? Today's a weekday, so we also could have worked at club."

".... Is that a problem?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

"I see. So then what's the problem?"

Well, that's true... it's just that lately, my family has been whispering rumors about how the eldest son has been bringing a younger girl up to his room. My mother had always thought that I was dating Manami, so all I got from her now were cold looks. Like I was some adulterer she wanted dead.

“By the way... why hasn’t Saori been coming over lately?”

“Who knows? Perhaps she’s too busy.”

This girl... she hasn’t heard from her friend for a while and she’s not worried at all. I wonder why...

To be honest, not seeing Saori for a while made me feel really lonely. Maybe I should give her a call next time?

I guess it’s true that you don’t realize what you have until you’ve lost it.

And I guess I really did like Saori more than I had thought. And that I really got lonely more easily than I thought.

“While we’re on the subject, is it alright for you to be with me so much? What about Tamura-senpai?”

“..... Well, she’s been a bit unsociable lately, so...”

I mean, of course our usual study sessions were still going on, and I didn’t sense anything strange from her like I had that other time, so I never paid too much attention to it. It was pretty inexplicable.

So lately, it’s come to be that I’ve been spending all my time with Kuroneko.

“By the way, your game is almost done, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s true. The scenario and CGs are all done, and we’re just going to use things we can find for free for the music... so all that’s left is to put all the scenes together. If we’re fast, we can finish everything in a few days. There’s still just around a week until the deadline, so it looks like we’re going to make it.”

“Haha, that’s great. Congrats.”

I offered her my congratulations while staying off the subject of her deteriorating relationship with Sena.

However... things didn’t go that well.

When we tried to put the finishing touches on the game by stringing all the individual scenes together, the game stopped really functioning. Even in places where things were working fine before, the game started to freeze or crash. We also saw inexplicable cases where, after a decision point, we went on a route that was completely disconnected to the original route we were on, or cases where picking the same decision at a decision point resulted in going on different routes each time.

“..... This is quite strange.”

Kuroneko also looked pretty flustered, and although she still showed no emotion, she frantically typed on the keyboard in an attempt to fix all the problems.

“..... Sorry, I guess I didn’t check everything properly...”

“..... Hmph, it’s not your fault. It’s not like I was hoping for you to do it at an expert’s level... I really wasn’t expecting much out of you in the first place.”

So that was true. As I thought.

But was that really something you should be saying out loud?

“The bugs are my fault... Please don’t try to take responsibility for my own misses.”

Her words were filled with piercing emotion, but also with earnest sincerity.

Part 13

It was lunchtime, and we were in the classroom.

“..... This is a bit tough...”

We couldn’t fix the mistakes no matter how hard we tried, so we showed the game to Makabe-kun, and he came back with a rather unfavorable response.

“..... You can’t fix it?”

“... I can. But we have to start by figuring out exactly where and what the bugs are, and that takes time.”

“... How much time?”

“Well... even if I got the president to help me... I really don’t think we can get it done in a week. So... I don’t think we can make it in time for the contest.”

“.....”

Seriously...? Ugh..... dammit.....

“... I had heard that Gokou-san has studied how to make games before, but this is her first time actually trying to make one, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Kuroneko didn't answer, so I answered for her.

“Then that's already more than enough. To think that she could make this much content on her first try is already really amazing.”

“Yeah, that's right. You really did a great job by yourself. You had enough work that even with a group I thought you would barely make it, but you really did much more than I had expected.”

The president also praised her like that (although, he completely ignored me).

Yes, exactly. You really did a great job.

There are some things that just can't be helped. There are times when you just had to give up. After all, humans could only do the things that they could do.

In my seventeen years of life, that was one of the lessons that had truly sunk into my heart.

“Hey..... Kuroneko.....”

Knowing that my kouhai was probably pretty disappointed right now, I called out to her with a kind voice. And when I did that, I heard Kuroneko mumble.

“So, what you’re saying is that there are bugs in my game that you can’t fix very quickly, and we won’t be able to make it by the contest deadline, right?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

The president nodded.

Kuroneko turned her eyes downwards and fell into thought for a bit. But then...

She quickly turned heel, her shoes making an audible scraping noise against the floor.

“H-Hey, where are you going?”

Kuroneko didn’t respond, didn’t even turn back, but just quickly walked out of the room.

I managed to get a small glimpse of her face when she left, and I saw that she was firmly biting down on her lower lip...

And a silent determination burned in both her eyes.

Part 14

I chased after Kuroneko. She just continued to walk through the hallway at a quick pace, not showing any signs of noticing that I was following her.

I had no intention of stopping her, but she was pretty hard to catch up to. So I just kept up with her and followed her.

Before long, we arrived at a first year classroom. It was the class that Kuroneko belonged to.

... What in the world did she think she was doing? I have no idea what this girl could be thinking.

Probably because an upperclassman like me had shown up, the hallway was abuzz with murmuring. I could feel curious looks piercing through me. But it's not like I could just glare at them and make them scatter like I did that time before.

Kuroneko threw the classroom door open strongly and entered.

She attracted her fair share of stares as well. After all, she was usually the loner, who ate her lunch in an isolated place far from everyone else, and she had just charged back into the classroom looking flustered... people were probably wondering what was going on.

Kuroneko headed straight for a certain seat. And in that seat was none other than Sena.

Sena: the clean freak, the brocon, the person who couldn't forgive anything that wasn't proper... and also the closet fujoshi.

I wonder what she thought about herself right now.

Of course, I had no way of knowing for sure, but I could make a guess.

After all, when it came to things that weren't proper, there was nobody that knew better than I did.

She was annoyed, probably. Annoyed at herself.

She was probably angry at her own hypocrisy of disobeying a rule that she herself had set out.

The presentation hadn't gone as well as she had planned.

After that, she disobeyed the club's rules and ran off by herself.

Like that, she began to sulk, not able to admit to her own mistake.

It definitely wasn't uncommon. And I wasn't in a position to blame her for it.

I mean, I was similar myself.

In fact, I feel that everyone has gone through something like this before.

Seeing Kuroneko approach her, Sena paled and bit her lower lip.

“..... What are you doing, Gokou-san? Everyone is trying to eat their lunches and you’re being quite noisy.”

“Akagi-san. Please, I need you to lend me your strength.”

Sena had steeled herself for what was coming, but at that she opened her eyes wide and froze. “Eh?”

“... W-What do you mean?”

“Bugs showed up in the game I’m making. At this rate, we won’t be able to make it by the contest deadline.”

“..... And?”

“You should be able to fix it, right?”

“Why... do you think that?”

“Because I listened to your presentation... and I played your game. You used some really complicated programs to make your game run more efficiently, but even then there were no bugs. I wouldn’t be able to do something like that. Nobody in the club could do something like that. If you help me, then we should be able to get the game done in time.”

“And that’s why you want me to lend you my strength...?”

“Yes.”

Kuroneko answered in the affirmative, and Sena fell into silence with a conflicted expression. I could also feel that this wouldn’t be an appropriate time for me to butt in.

I was so nervous I could feel my throat drying up.

The murmuring in the classroom slowly got louder. Her classmates probably knew Kuroneko as a rather quiet person, so this was most likely the first time they saw her speak so openly like this.

But in the next instant, all the murmuring came to a complete stop.

-

Kuroneko was bowing her head down towards Sena.

-

"Please, make a game together with me."

This was Kuroneko we were talking about. A girl who was proud, shy, and who was almost never honest with herself.

Each and every person in that room was lost for words. And for good reason. I was shocked as well. I blinked over and over, wondering if I was just seeing things.

Kuroneko's fists were clenched tight, and her legs were slightly shaking.

This must've been really frustrating for her. I could imagine that this was the first time in her life that she's done something like this in front of an audience.

But despite that, this girl could bow her head sincerely to someone.

Seeming to recover from her amazed stupor, Sena took Kuroneko by the hand and tugged on it.

"..... You..... come here for a minute...!!"

Sena dragged Kuroneko along and quickly rushed in my direction.

I panicked and tried to dodge out of the way, but she lightly knocked into me as she passed.

“Oof.”

When I looked back, I saw Sena walking out of the room with Kuroneko in tow. She was probably planning to take her somewhere private, like she did to me in the bookshop.

Somewhere where they could talk.

Immediately after they left, I began to chase after them.

Part 15

“Geez, think about where you are when you say things like that...! ... I can’t believe you.”

Sena had brought Kuroneko to the back of the school.

It was the same place I had seen Kuroneko eating alone that other day.

“..... Why did you have to go that far? Bowing your head to me in front of such a big crowd...”

Sena looked irritated as she pressed against Kuroneko. Kuroneko was pinned between the wall and Sena’s breasts, like I had been that other time. Sena was gripping Kuroneko’s wrists, and from what I could tell she was gripping them with quite a bit of strength.

“Also, what does this have to do with me anymore? ... I’ve already been scouted by the public morals committee, so I’m planning to quit that pointless club.”

Hearing those words of rejection, Kuroneko swung her arms and got out of Sena’s hold.

She leaned in close to Sena until their noses were almost touching and gave her an intense stare.

“... I... I want to finish this game no matter what I have to do. And if possible, I want to win a prize in the competition.”

“I know that! What I was asking was why you had to go that far! What is it? Is it that if you don’t win the competition, you’ll be cursed to death or something like that?! To be honest, seeing how you’re acting, I’m starting to think that that’s actually the case!”

Sena seemed to be the one in the most pain as she spat out her anger.

Kuroneko responded to Sena’s sarcasm. “It’s close to that.”

“If I start something, I will see that something to completion. I will hold my goals up high and exhaust all my strength striving to complete them. I learned to live my life like that from a certain someone. If I don’t do that, then I will forever be a loser... I will just continue to wander around aimlessly with malice in my heart. And my pride will not allow me to live like that.”

“..... What.... are you saying?”

“Right now, I was talking about an infuriating friend who has already gone off somewhere far away.”

She didn’t even need to say who she was talking about.

Seriously, this girl thought the exact same way that I did.

We had both gotten influenced by the same person, and had both taken one step forwards... and that led us to where we were today.

“This person... is this the same person you said during the presentation that you wanted to beat down?”

“... Yeah, that’s right... I want to make her kneel at my feet and lick my boots. And to do that, no matter how shameful or unsightly it may be, I will fight and struggle until the very end.”

A light but charming smile rose up onto Kuroneko’s face.

She moistened her lips with her tongue, looking almost like a cat who had found her prey.

“Hmph... to think she could make me feel like this... I’ll have to make sure she is paid back in full. I won’t forgive her for winning and then making a run for it. Next time I meet her, I’ll definitely make her speechless.”

She wanted to be able to hold her head high when Kirino came back.

She had to look deep inside herself and improve.

At least, that’s what I heard in her words.

“So...”

Kuroneko looked straight at Sena.

She wasn't wearing her color contacts... but I could swear I saw her eyes glowing a sinister red.

"So please join me, Akagi Sena. If you're still unsatisfied, then I can beg if you want me to."

"Gokou-san, you..."

Sena looked at Kuroneko with a bewildered expression.

"Why is it that you haven't blamed me for anything yet? It's strange for me to be saying this myself, but aren't I the worst? I lost during the presentation, but just because I didn't like your plan I ran away... and on top of that, you ended up being the first one to bow your head..."

"Who was wrong or who apologized first is not important. What's more important is that I want to make a game with you."

Kuroneko fluidly communicated what I believed were her true feelings. She didn't want to lose to a certain someone, would complete her game at all costs, and didn't want to give up. Her words were probably born out of that motivation, but...

She probably never imagined that she would have to ask Sena for help.

Then, feeling completely cornered, she let her true feelings flow out.

And I'm sure those feelings got across to Sena.

"Friends are more amazing than you could imagine. If there's something you can't do by yourself, then join up with another person... or maybe two... and you might be able to do it. If there's a time when you feel helpless and can't move forward... with another person, you can gain the courage to do so. If you try and try but nothing pays off, if you just continue to recklessly exhaust your efforts and hope to be rewarded for it, but even then you don't get results... and the plan backfires just as much as the effort you put into it, and you find yourself close to tears... if there is someone who will hold you up at those times, then you can get through it. And then, just a few words... just a few trivial words are enough to repay all your efforts... mm... yes, that's right..."

For just a fleeting, fleeting moment, I saw Kuroneko smile nostalgically.

"If I have friends to help me, then I still have energy to spare. That's something I learned recently."

And so, she wanted Sena to make a game with her.

Her cheeks were just a bit flushed, but Kuroneko had spoken with a serious expression.

I'm sure that a year ago, Kuroneko would never have said something like that, even by accident.

And so, over this past year... I wasn't the only one who had changed.

And then...

"... I see."

Sena dropped her shoulders and the tension left her body. Almost as if Kuroneko's words had seeped into every fiber of her being.

She let out an exhausted chuckle.

"So? Is the game data in the clubroom?"

"Ah, so you'll help?"

"I'm not helping."

-

"Rather, we're *making the game together*, right?"

-

... You know, I really was an idiot.

I really was an arrogant, conceited idiot.

To think that I thought that I had to try hard to make a friend for Kuroneko.

Right now, I was so ashamed of myself that I almost felt fire shooting out of my cheeks.

From the very start, nobody had needed my help.

Recognizing my own uselessness and feeling this way was one thing, but...

I was really, really happy.

Part 16

Let me concisely summarize what happened in the half a month after that day.

After returning to the game club, Sena fixed the bugs in the game in no time at all. She stood there letting orders fly at Kuroneko and Makabe-kun, and they crushed the bugs one after another... and they finished repairing the game, a task that everyone had thought was impossible before the competition deadline, in only two days.

And what's more, as if trying to make up for lost time, Sena began to get deeply involved in making the game. Kuroneko and Sena butted heads quite often, sometimes having shouting matches and hurling insults back and forth, and they began to brush up the game. You could say they had a lot of planning meetings with each other. But these were not like the meetings I had been a part of at the publishing company.

But that was to be expected. After all, at that publishing company meeting, not only were we dealing with a pro, but all he did was criticize Kuroneko's work, so it really didn't feel like they were trying to cooperate to make something.

In that regard, these meetings that Sena and Kuroneko had, where they clashed over their own ideas of how to make the game more interesting, were more genuine examples of planning meetings.

In the end, as a result of those planning meetings, even the genre of the game ended up changing.

With Kuroneko's approval, Sena was allowed to also put RPG elements into the game.

The title of the game was "Greed's Labyrinth (Seven Deadly Sins Series, Second Game)."

They ended up putting the text Kuroneko had written on top of the RPG system that Sena had made.

It just so happened that both their games were set in a labyrinth anyways, so this was a pretty good match.

You should have just done that from the start! is probably what everyone in the club was thinking, but everyone wisely kept their mouths shut.

Of course, changing the genre when the deadline was so close added a lot of work that needed to be done, and naturally things got chaotic as the deadline loomed. In the end, Sena shut herself in her room and worked overnight (I had gone over to help as well, but Kouhei-Oniichan turned into a demon and chased me out of the house. It was terrible.)

I'm not exaggerating when I say that the sight of them working like that was just terrifying. It was like a life or death situation.

This was precisely the "crunch time" that I've often heard creators talking about, wasn't it?

It was quite incredible how they punished and tormented themselves like that.

But within that mess, I could also see them having what you could call “fun.”

I’m not trying to say that they’re masochists. Rather, it was similar to the kind of “fun” you saw in sports. How should I put it... take soccer, or baseball, or track... you would hone your skills through grueling practices, and then put those skills on display in matches.

I really felt like creating games wasn’t any different from that.

On the day that they completed the game, I heard the following exchange:

“You seriously can write 6kb of text per hour, can’t you? I really didn’t believe you when you first said that.”

“You too... you really got rid of a lot of bugs in such a short amount of time. What’s your secret?”

“Well, when all’s said and done, it’s intuition.”

“Intuition?”

“Yes. How should I put it... I really don’t know how to say it. When I make games, I can clearly see the parts that *aren’t proper*. That’s why I’m really, really good at debugging, fixing game balance issues, and correcting typos. You just have to look at all the digital data from the top down and pick out the unpleasant parts.”

Hearing that, Makabe-kun seemed surprised.

“... Umm... so when I first met Akagi-san, the reason you were able to find that boss’s weak points and safe areas was...”

“Ah, yes, that’s the same thing. As long as it’s in the form of digital data, there’s probably nothing that I can’t break through.”

Sena looked quite proud of herself and puffed out her chest, her breasts swaying a bit. It also seemed like she was telling the truth.

What was this? Did all gamers have superpowers like this?

Kuroneko seemed excited for some reason.

“Don’t tell me... that ability you have... if you take off your glasses, it grows stronger?”

“How did you know?”

“... Wha... the digital version of the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception...?”¹ T-To think it actually exists...”

Kuroneko’s eyes widened and she shivered, stumbling a bit.

“... Please think of this as an honor. From now on, I will call you ‘User of the Mystic Eyes’ with much respect.”

“Did I just get a completely chuunibyou² nickname?!”

It seemed that through game creation, Kuroneko and Sena had come to acknowledge each other’s strengths.

See, look... wasn’t this exactly like what happened in sports?

And then, there was the long-awaited result. How did the game we made do in the competition?

Well, we didn’t win a prize at all, but we definitely made a splash on the Chaos Create forums.

¹ A reference to a recurring power in Type-Moon visual novels.

² I’ve footnoted this before, but... this is a derogatory term for older people who still pretend to have magical powers or things like that. Literally, middle school syndrome.

-

By which I mean, people were calling it shit.

-

Back in the clubroom...

“NOOOOoooooooooooooooooooo!! They made a thread about the
gaaaaaaaaaaaaame! This is terrible! Do these people not have hearts?!”

“..... You’re noisy. Please stop looking for game reviews on the internet and then going crazy over them. And also, that thread is mostly bashing my scenario, is it not? Why does that bother you?”

“T-That’s obvious, isn’t it?! It’s because they’re criticizing our game. It doesn’t matter which part they end up criticizing!”

“I did what I wanted to do, and the result wasn’t well-received by the users. I’m the one to blame.”

“If you say that, then let me point out that my game system wasn’t exactly praised either! To put it another way, it wasn’t even bashed! And the only reason we were in such a rush at the end was because of me! Also, can you just stop it with trying to take all the blame yourself? With these things, the right to feel happy or frustrated belongs to all people involved. Am I wrong?!”

“... Thank you for your opinion. Well then, please be as frustrated as your heart pleases. In return, if people in the clubrooms around us come complaining, I'll leave that to you.”

“Well then, I'll take you up on that offer then! Ughhh, this is terrible! Gyaaah, I'm so annoyed!! But really, Gokou-san, you're being awfully calm about this. How can you be like that when they wrote such terrible things about the game?”

Sena unhappily poked the screen with a finger, with enough force that I thought she would poke a hole into it.

Kuroneko scowled at her comrade-in-arms out the side of her eyes and whispered in a detached tone.

“... I'm already used to it.”

So I won't let my feelings show, is how I heard her continue in my head.

After all, there's no way she wasn't frustrated.

Yes... she's had it tough up until now... her work was trashed by Kumagai-san, and she was relentlessly made fun of by Kirino.

And to me, it seemed that the difference between Kuroneko and Sena's reactions to this criticism was a reflection not of their own personalities, but more a reflection of the experiences they had had up until now.

“Hey, Kousaka-senpai. Are you listening?”

“A-Ahh... what is it?”

Sena, you’re giving me a really scary look. Ah, but whatever. Today I’ll listen to your complaints through to the end.

Even though I couldn’t be any use at all... I was frustrated too.

“Up until now, I’ve thought that reacting emotionally to criticism just shows a lack of appreciation for the people who took the time to play your game, and if you have time to do that then you should spend it improving. I thought that only idiots with no self-control get worked up over anonymous Internet opinions. But, when I see something I made getting treated like this on the internet, I have to revise my opinion. Keeping calm in the face of anonymous Internet criticism? Hah, **that can eat shit and go to hell! Things that piss me off just piss me off, god dammit!!**”

Bam! Sena smashed her hands onto the keyboard.

“C-Calm down... girls shouldn’t say things like ‘eat shit’ and ‘god dammit.’ Come on, that’s just not right.”

“As if I care! I-I’ll definitely kill these people! I’ll definitely, definitely kill these people! The people who are writing these comments on forums without a care in the world, and the people who are posting on blogs with their smug expressions, they’re all guilty! Gyaaah!!! You better prepare yourself, you pigs! I’ll find out who you are, secretly friend you on mixi³, and kill you in an offline meeting!”

Bam bam bam bam! Sena continued to bang on the keyboard with incredible force.

“Hey, stop that! You’re going to break the keyboard!”

“But...!!! But... ugh...”

She is just way too frustrated!

I’ll bet that the people making these criticisms would have never guessed that the game staff would wish for their deaths so fiercely for each and every one of their comments.

“I’m sure everyone thinks that way! It’s not just me!”

“No, it’s not like that!”

³ Japanese social networking site.

I desperately tried to calm Sena down, for the honor of all the creators in the world.

Kuroneko, who had been doing her own work on her own PC, also seemed a bit fed up.

“Seriously... what if you just stop looking up reviews online?”

“E-Even if you tell me that, I can’t help but search for them~~~~!!! And what’s more, I dug up all the criticism that even the search engines didn’t show! I’m good at that! Oooghh... w-what’s with this helpless feeling I have?! H-H-How do I make it go away?!”

“Make the next game. Make the next game so interesting that it will just floor everyone who plays it.”

Kuroneko said that without taking her eyes off her screen, and not letting her typing pace drop a bit.

“Doing that will be much more satisfying than going off and killing each and every person who criticized your game.”

“... At least you’re an expert with words... rather, you’re a pretty forward-looking person, Gokou-san.”

“Hmph, it’s just that there’s no other way to deal with this.... but in any case, I have a plan for a game that will teach all those people who made fools of us a lesson. Are you in?”

“Of course. This time I’ll be involved from start to finish... so it’ll definitely be amazing! By the way, we’re going to make the protagonist a stylish, macho man, like the ones you see in Gears of War!”

“Rejected.”

These types of conversations in the clubroom...

They were very much a part of the club life that Kuroneko had gotten for herself.

She had tried so very, very hard, and in the end found just one companion.

Both Kuroneko and Sena probably weren’t happy about the outcome here at all.

So no matter how much I praised them, I doubted they would accept my praise honestly.

That’s why I kept what I was thinking inside my heart.

You two are really quite something.

End Chapter 3



ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai⑤

第四章

Part 1

It was after school on a certain day. As usual, I was headed for the shoe racks with Manami.

And just like a certain other time, when we approached the staircase landing, we saw Kuroneko in the midst of cleaning.

“Hey.”

“.....”

I gave her a friendly wave and greeted her, but Kuroneko gave me only a single glance before immediately averting her gaze and going back to cleaning.

And as usual, I couldn’t see any other person helping her clean.

“This again...”

I gave a pained smile and continued to walk down the stairs.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, Manami seemed a bit puzzled.

“Kyouchan, is it really okay to not help her?”

“It’s fine.”

Helping that girl was no longer in my jurisdiction. I set my sights onto the water faucet in the school grounds, and gave a single glance to a certain girl who was there wetting a mop. After the girl finished with the mop and put it into a bucket, she began to walk in my direction. And once she realized I was there, she gave me a suspicious look.

“... Did you want something with me, Kousaka-senpai?”

“Nah. Good luck with cleaning.”

Yes, this wasn’t my party to crash anymore.

I felt a tinge of loneliness along with a warm feeling of satisfaction, and left that place behind.

Part 2

“..... Ah. So something like that happened.”

“Yeah. Honestly, I didn’t meddle at all. And eventually, they figured it out themselves.”

As we walked towards the shoe racks, I explained the situation to Manami.

“But at least it wasn’t all for nothing.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

And I agreed because... well... it’s not like I had to be the one to help Kuroneko out. If she could make a friend and have a more enjoyable time at school, then that was enough for me. It didn’t have to be my doing, and that’s what I believed from the bottom of my heart.

They say that sometimes people change when they become aware of their own questionable motives.

I think my situation was something like that.

“Anyways... good work, Kyouchan.”

She gave me a gentle smile.

At Manami's words, I suddenly felt a sense of closure.

"Thanks. Haha, for some reason, I feel pretty refreshed."

"Fufu, refreshed enough to tackle our midterms?"

"Of course. All thanks to you."

"Hehe, you're very welcome."

We stood side by side and chatter chattered as we leisurely walked towards the gate.

A few flower petals were already falling from the row of sakura trees that lined the walkway.

The signs of spring were vanishing, quickly being replaced by the atmosphere of summer.

It was at that moment... at that moment when the cell phone in my back pocket began to ring, signaling that I had gotten mail.

"Whoops. Sorry, I got an email."

With that brief heads-up, I looked at my phone screen, and saw that I had two new messages.

One was from Kuroneko. It had an empty subject line, and all it said was “I’ll be waiting at three thirty behind the school building.” It almost felt like she was challenging me to a fight or something.

“..... I wonder if I did something...”

Getting an email like this so suddenly from my kouhai made me pretty nervous. Though, if she wanted something from me, she could have just told me earlier when we saw each other in school. I cocked my head to the side and checked the second mail.

And I saw that it was...

“I-It’s from Kirino!”

“Hm? Really?”

“Y-Yeah. The subject line is ‘Re: Contact Me,’ and that was an email I had sent her a while ago...”

What’s up with her? Why did she wait so damn long to respond?! Wasn’t this way overdue?!

... Hmph, she's probably going to talk about how she broke some new record over there... or she made friends with some cute girl. Or... she got a boyfriend. I'm sure she would just write about irritating stuff like that. But Kuroneko and Saori and Ayase... all of them were worried about Kirino... so if at least she seemed healthy, then well, maybe that would be enough. Everyone would be relieved.

"Hey, Kyouchan. Why don't you take a look at what it says?"

"Hm? Hmm... y-yeah. W-Well, it's not like I'm going to respond to her anyways. I'll just take a quick look, I guess."

Click. I firmly pushed a button on my cell phone, and felt my heartbeat quicken.

But the contents of the mail I had gotten from my little sister betrayed my expectations.

My collection that I entrusted to you. Throw it all away.

That was all that was written.

"....."

I stared blankly at the email my sister had sent me, completely bewildered.

My collection that I entrusted to you. Throw it all away.

“Throw it all away... what does she mean?”

Did throw it away mean I should just dump it all in the garbage?

No, that can't be. That's definitely not what she means.

“Is it some kind of metaphor?”

Even if I thought about it, I couldn't come up with an answer. But I couldn't just take what was written in the mail at face value. I entertained that notion for a second, but I immediately rejected it. After all, it was impossible.

Other than my little sister herself, I knew better than anyone in the world how precious that collection was to her. So I'm sure. There's no way she would tell me to throw her collection away. There was no way, and I didn't even want to consider it.

The collection inside that closet also included the EX Meruru Special Figure, which Ayase, Soari, Kuroneko, and I had worked so hard to give to her as a gift.

The DVD box set of Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru she had watched together with Kuroneko and me was there, too.

Also, the copy of “Loving my Little Sister,” which led to that life advice session, was also there...

Everything, everything was there.

To... to throw all that away. There was no way she would say that.

“Kyouchan... your face... it’s getting pretty pale.”

“..... I-It’s nothing... tch.”

Manami was puzzled, but I half-ignored her and dialed my sister’s number immediately.

But she didn’t pick up. The phone rang ten times, then twenty times... but Kirino’s voice never came from the other end.

“I guess this is a no go...”

Dammit! What the hell does she mean, ‘throw it away’?! Doesn’t she have anything else to say after she made everyone worry like that?!

... Let’s try something else. For now, I wanted to verify, somehow, that the email she sent me was a mistake of some kind. I was already convinced that it was a mistake. I was convinced, but...

If I didn't make absolutely sure, then I wouldn't be able to rest easy. The contents of that letter were way too extreme, after all.

"..... Maybe I should call Ayase?"

That was probably a good idea. There was no way that Kirino would contact me before she talked with her close friend Ayase, so Ayase probably knew something about what was going on with Kirino.

And I mean... for better or worse, I liked Ayase quite a lot.

That girl really, really hated me though, so I was pretty hesitant to just call her without any reason to. But depending on how I thought about this, this could be a good excuse to give her a call.

"Alrighty then!"

Suddenly, I got pumped. Wait for me, my lovely angel Ayase-tan!

Here I go!

I think I just needed an emergency emotional escape, or a way to get away from reality, or a way even just to temporarily calm myself down and get my thoughts in order...

In high spirits, I dialed out the number that Ayase herself had once given me.

But then...

By request of the customer you have dialed, we are unable to connect you.

By request of the customer you have dialed, we are unable to connect you.

Click. Beep, beep, beep, beep...

“By request of the customer... she blocked my calls?!”

I cried. I exhausted all my strength in a wail of anguish.

Oooooooooooo... this was the first time I had heard what the call blocking message sounded like...

I crumbled to my knees, almost as if I had absorbed all the world's woes into my body.

“... I-It's over..... He, hehe... everything's over... anything and everything...”

H-How terrible... to think there was such abject cruelty in this world...

And just as much as I had been excited, my mood came crashing back down to earth. I couldn't even stand anymore.

Seeing my abnormal behavior, Manami gingerly asked me a question, in a tone that made me imagine her prodding a tumor.

“K-Kyouchan...? Do you... umm... do you want to get in touch with Ayase-chan?”

“Huh?”

I lifted my face, by now smeared by my runny nose, and saw Manami taking out her own cell phone and showing it to me.

Hmm? Since when did Manami carry a cell phone around with her? Did she actually have the gall to adapt to modern technology? But also, from the flow of this conversation...

“What? What do you mean?”

“Umm, well... I happen to have exchanged phone numbers with Ayase-chan...”

“Wha-?! S-Since when were you friends with Ayase?!”

“Ehehe... well...”

Well nothing! J-Just the thought of those two together... it was just simply, completely, unimaginable...

Exactly how could two people who were so different become friends?

Also, how close could they be? They only just met in January, right?

I really couldn't imagine what an old woman and a junior high girl could have in common...

Hm, I have no idea. I really wonder what they could be talking about over the phone with each other...

Well... I also made new friends like Saori and Kuroneko, so it's none of my business if Manami goes and makes new friends too... but I mean... it's just that I felt a bit lonely... or a bit annoyed... wait, what am I doing, getting jealous of Ayase here?! Am I an idiot?!

"Ah, well, please help me then."

"Okay."

Manami put her Rakuraku Phone¹ to her ear, and after exchanging a few words with the person on the other end, gave me a nod and handed the phone over. I took it and put it to my ear.

¹ A brand of phone, manufactured by Fujitsu.

“..... H-hello?”

“It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it, oniisan?”

Uwah, it was really Ayase! My angel Ayase-tan!

“Don’t give me that! Why did you block my number?! Did I do something to you?!”

Well, certainly, I did do “something” to her at last year’s summer Comiket... but to be clear, ever since then I’ve only done very little for her to block my number over!

“Eh? It took you that long to figure that out? I’ve had your number blocked for more than half a year...”

“Seriously?!”

Now that I thought about it, I’ve never really contacted Ayase in any way other besides email!

To think she had blocked my number ever since summer Comiket... ugh... ignorance is bliss...

"... So what is it? Don't tell me that you bothered neesan² to call me just so you could tell me that? If so, that's quite bothersome, so I'd appreciate it if you never did that again."

I could feel my heart shattering to pieces! Was there a person who could be told that by a junior high school girl and not break out into tears?!

Ever since I met her, when I played erogé I would always start by going after the character with the long black hair, but what was terrible was that despite all my efforts in erogé, she just treated me like some hentai. Was there no way I could convince her that I was actually clean and pure?

Well, it's not like I could actually tell her the truth about what had happened, so there wasn't much I could do about it.

"No, not that. I just wanted to ask you something."

"Ask me something?"

"Yeah. It's... about my sister."

Those words had an immediate effect.

² Technically means "sister," but can be used as a general honorific/term of endearment towards older girls.

"About Kirino...?"

I could tell through the phone that Ayase had just become much more serious.

"Yeah. After that... after she left, did Kirino ever try to contact you?"

Only once, right after Kirino had gone overseas, had I spoken with Ayase.

She had told me that Kirino hadn't told her anything, and had seemed frustrated that Kirino had never contacted her.

And a few months had passed since then... so I wondered what the situation was now.

"... Not at all. Not even once... I've tried to email her many, many times since then... but she... she never ever responded."

She almost sounded like she was in tears by the time she had finished her sentence.

"Oniisan... does Kirino... does Kirino hate me...?"

"There's no way!"

I suddenly found myself shouting at the phone. Kirino might act in really confusing ways sometimes, but I didn't want to hear words like those coming from Ayase's mouth.

"... I know all too well how much she was hurting that one time you two fought... there's no way someone like that would ever hate you. And I mean, even if I didn't tell you that... you probably know that better than anyone."

"..... That's... true I guess... I apologize."

"Nah, I'm sorry too for yelling like that."

What the hell?

To think that Kirino had never even thought to contact Ayase since then...

In that case, what exactly was the meaning of that mail she had sent me? She had only contacted me, had only sent me one email, and in that email she told me to throw away her entire collection...

Was it a joke? A prank? If that's the case, then it was fine; I would just get in touch with her and tell her to stop screwing with me, and that would be that.

But if it really was a prank or a joke, then to think that she wouldn't even contact her close friend...

What should I do? What am I supposed to do in a situation like this?

"Oniisan? Umm, did something happen to Kirino? Like, perhaps an accident-"

"Nah, nothing happened. Don't worry about it."

I tried to speak in as frank a tone as possible so Ayase would not get suspicious.

... After all, there was no way I could tell her about all this, right?

"She also hasn't contacted me at all... so I was pretty worried. And that's why I called you."

"I see... so she hasn't called oniisan either... I... I think that there has to be a really good reason why Kirino hasn't called any of us."

"Yeah."

I thought so too. I didn't know what that reason was, but it there was definitely something off with how she wouldn't even contact her beloved friends Ayase and Kuroneko.

"But... even so... if Kirino were to call any of us... I think she would call oniisan. So when that happens..."

Ayase stopped mid-sentence for a bit, and then continued in a kind voice that was filled with sympathy.

"When that happens, please try and help her however you can."

"... I got it."

.....

..... But how was I supposed to do that?

Part 3

After I finished my phone call with Ayase, I parted from Manami and headed for where I was supposed to meet Kuroneko.

But all I could think about was that email Kirino had sent me.

I unconsciously began to slow down, until I was standing completely still.

I took out my cell phone, and once again stared at the email that Kirino had sent me.

I had thought that if Kirino contacted any of us, she would contact Ayase.

But Ayase had thought the same thing about me.

If Kirino were to call any of us... I think she would call oniisan.

That's ridiculous. I have no idea why that would be true. Certainly, I had been the one who had shouldered the burden of her many secret life advice sessions. But that was just because there wasn't anyone else suitable for that purpose. And even if I ended up hating her when I found out her secret, she wouldn't have an issue with that.

... But that wasn't true.

I knew. It was something that I had said myself. The words I had screamed at Ayase came rebounding back at me. I was the one who should know this better than anybody else possibly could.

At any rate, I had heard it with my own ears. "*I'm really thankful*" ... those words were permanently ingrained into my memory, and I wasn't forgetting about them anytime soon.

No matter how clueless I was, if I was told that right to my face...

And I had come to realize how mistaken my perception of her really was.

I snapped my phone closed, and once again began to walk.

Part 4

When I arrived at the designated spot behind the school at three thirty, I found Kuroneko in her uniform waiting for me. It seemed that she had stayed behind at school even after she had finished cleaning. She was sitting in the same bench I had seen her sitting in before, that time when she was eating her Meruru bentou by herself.

When she realized I was there, Kuroneko quietly stood up. She spoke to me in a barely audible voice.

“... U-Umm...”

She started to say something, but one look at my face and she gave out a small “Ah...” as if she had just realized something. And then, she furrowed her brow, seeming to be pondering something... and finally spoke in a low voice.

“Your face looks dreadful.”

“... Really?”

“Yes. It’s like you’ve just witnessed the end of the world.”

Well... that was because I had just received a double blow from Ayase and Kirino.

“... Hmph. Well, if you’re like that, then it doesn’t seem like I can carry out what I came to do. Alright then, please, tell me what’s wrong. I’ll listen to you just this once.”

I was a bit worried about this thing that she had come to do, but...

“To tell you the truth, I got a pretty weird email from Kirino...”

... That’s right. With something like this, it might be good for me to tell Kuroneko about what had happened.

After all, when it came down to it, Kuroneko was just as close a friend to Kirino as Ayase was.

I relayed the situation to Kuroneko, and she just stood there quietly and listened.

“... And so that’s what happened.”

Kuroneko had closed her eyes, and she slowly reopened them.

“So? Why exactly are you loitering around in a place like this then?”

That was the first thing Kuroneko said to me after I had explained the situation to her.

“Huh?”

“Why exactly did you actually come here and meet up with me? That’s what I’m asking.”

Kuroneko seethed with quiet anger. She seemed annoyed, disdainful, even resentful. Almost like that time she had angrily started reciting that curse.

“I mean, it’s such a short email-“

“And that short email is more than enough to be able to tell what’s going on. In other words, your little sister has fallen into a situation that would force her to send you this kind of email. Or do you really think that she sent you something like this as a joke or on a whim? I think it’s pretty obvious which one it is, and I haven’t even known her for very long.”

My collection that I entrusted to you. Throw it all away.

There’s no way she would say that. I knew that...

“But she’s in America right now-“

“So what? How is that a problem? It’s not like she returned to the demon realm or fell into hell. You just can’t get in touch with her. But you know where she is, you know how to get there, you know exactly how worried you are about her... exactly what more do you need?”

Kuroneko firmly bit her lower lip.

And then, she spoke in a low, dark voice that reverberated as if it had come from the depths of hell itself.

“You are really, really really really, really just a worthless loser, senpai. You’re slow to act, stupid, have poor judgment, a pervert, an idiot, and just a lazy piece of trash. And yet, for some reason, you’re kind. Your personality is just as terrible as your sister’s. My God, it’s no wonder you two are siblings.”

I couldn’t say anything in response.

The abuse stopped coming, and silence filled the air. It was the same silence I had experienced time and time again with Kuroneko. But with her, silence wasn’t meaningless. Silence was just another form of communication.

Some time passed as we just stood there in silence, staring at each other. And then, finally...

“I... have something I want to report to you.”

Kuroneko muttered haltingly. They were rather strange words considering the conversation we had just been having, so I just stared at Kuroneko in bewilderment. “Huh?”

“Lots of things have improved... things in class, other things... so, I’m reporting them to you.”

Drop by drop, her words slowly and haphazardly came out. As always, she was bad when it came to speaking with other people. Usually, when someone did something in such a roundabout a way as this, they wouldn't manage to get anything across to the other person. But I knew. I also had a guess as to why she called me out here like this. She probably wanted to thank me. So, even though the words themselves might have sounded strange, I responded thusly:

"... Nah, I didn't really do anything much."

"Yes, you really were quite useless."

She agreed?! Wasn't that where she was supposed to look at me and go "No, that's not true at all"?!

"But, I was happy."

"....."

"... I was happy when you told me that you were worried about me as me, and not as your sister's replacement."

As she spoke, Kuroneko looked down at the ground.

W-Wait... this girl... what was she saying...?

“I was happy when you told me that you would prefer being called ‘senpai’ over ‘niisan.’”

Was she nervous? Was that why the hands she had clasped in front of her skirt were slightly shaking?

“Joining the same club as me, worrying about how I was alone in class, backing me up during my presentation, even choosing to spend less time with Tamura-senpai... and being with me.”

-

“It... It made me really, really happy.”

-

Had I died? Was I dreaming? My jaw dropped to the ground in dumbfounded amazement.

To think that someone who was usually so difficult...

To think a person like that would smile at me like that, would thank me like that... anybody would feel the same way in my position.

I was so surprised that my brain was just a mess.

I didn't know how to respond here... and I managed to eventually find the following words:

"A-Ah... I-I see."

I couldn't breathe properly right then. Hell, I even forgot to blink.

That was how hard I was looking at Kuroneko's face, how difficult it was for me to look away from her.

"But I think that you and I are both pretty difficult people."

"Huh?"

"Well, keep in mind that *I* was honest with you. So... *what do you plan to do?*"

"....."

Ah, I see.

She was showing me an example of how I should act.

This girl was really... how should I put it... I was a heartbeat away from falling for her.

My head was spinning, almost intoxicated, and in the face of such an obvious decision, I gave the equally obvious answer.

-

"I'm going to go see Kirino."

-

"..... I see."

Seeming satisfied, Kuroneko cast down her eyes and spoke in a gentle tone.

And once again, our conversation came to a standstill.

Now that I think about it, when it got like this before, it felt pretty awkward...

But now, it wasn't awkward at all.

"And that ends my report."

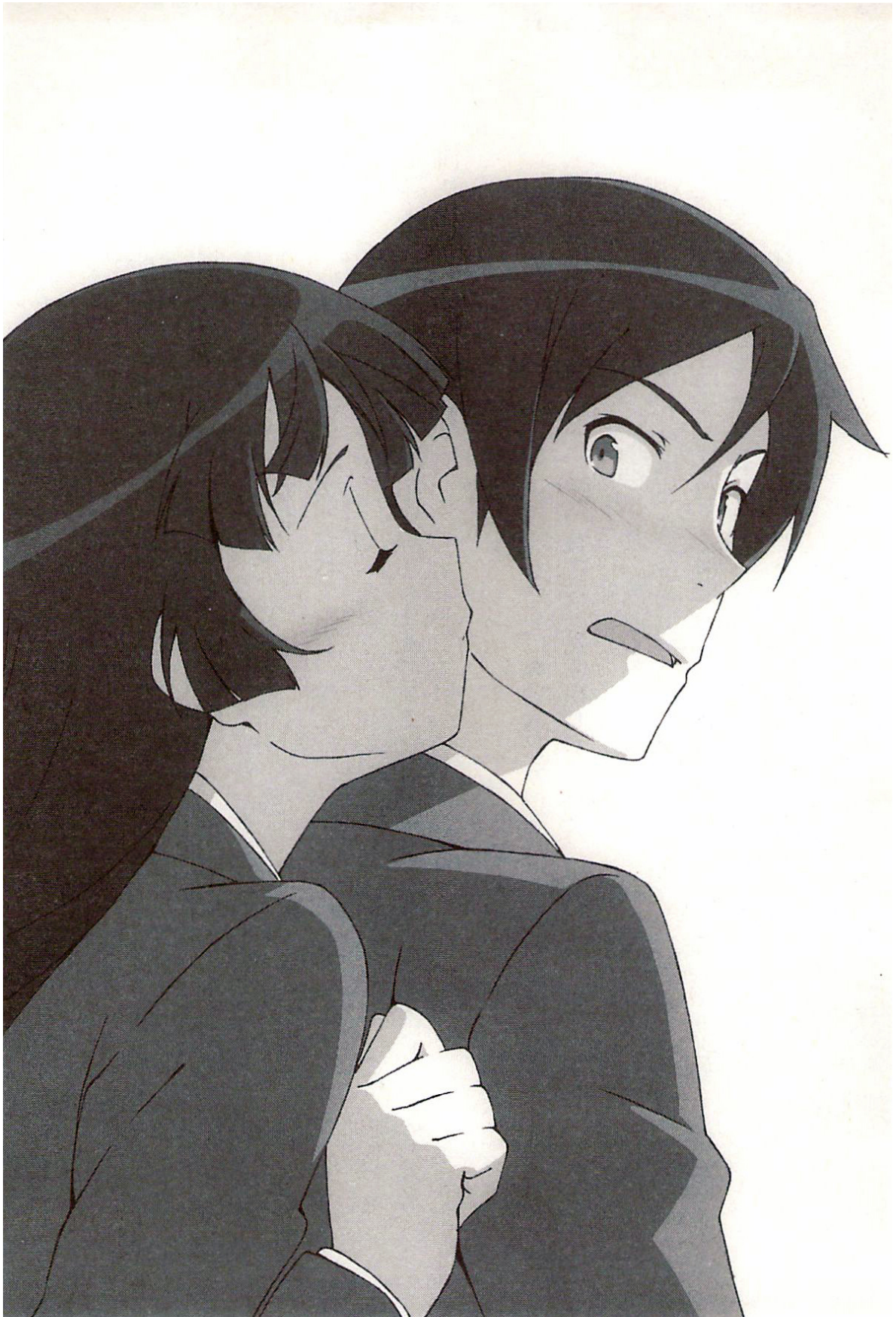
"I see."

I gripped my fists tightly, and turned the other way.

“Well then, I’m going to go.”

“Wait just a second.” I heard Kuroneko calling me from behind. And then I heard the sounds of her approach.

And when I turned around...



I felt a soft sensation on my cheek.

And then, Kuroneko's flushed face moved away from mine, leaving only a faint, sweet smell behind.

"..... Wh..... Wha....."

What the hell did she think she was doing..... is what I wanted to say, but my voice suddenly became hoarse and the words vanished from my mind.

Wh... what the hell?!

Seeming to guess what I was thinking from my facial expression alone, Kuroneko answered me.

"..... It's a curse. It's a curse that will kill you if you decide to slack off on the way. And until you grant my wishes, this curse will never be dispelled... and blood will spurt out of your entire body, causing you to writhe in agony and die a pathetic death."

Even as she flushed deep crimson from ear to ear, Kuroneko gave me a downright wicked grin. And then...

"If you understand, then remove yourself from my sight. This time, go and meddle in the life of your own little sister."

Kuroneko gave my back a strong push, sending me off to the other end of the sky.

Part 5

The plane I had taken from Narita International ¹ finally seemed to level off out of its initial climb. I had been pretty much clinging to the seat in front of me in fear, but now I let out a huge sigh of relief and slowly lifted my head.

I traced a finger softly around my cheek.

There were still hints of that soft sensation and that feeling of warmth there.

“... That probably really was a curse...”

I really couldn't decide what that girl was trying to do exactly when she did that.

Was she trying to cheer me up and motivate me?

Was she trying to do her best to help out her good friend Kirino?

Or maybe she was trying to be a bit of a tease...? Or rather...

¹ One of the two airports near Tokyo.

I give up for now. I'll think about it more when everything's wrapped up and I get back to Japan.

At any rate, I felt more indebted to that girl than ever.

Because of Kuroneko, I was here doing this. What was shocking was that it was only a few hours after my meeting with her.

When I had gotten home after that, for some reason my father was home, and I talked to him about my plan to meet Kirino.

"GREAT IDEA! GET GOING NOW!!"

My father seemed really, really into the idea.

He brought out a suitcase from his own room, and basically thrust it into my arms.

"Everything you need is in there. Don't wait. Just take it and go."

Why exactly had he already been completely packed to go on a trip? And why had he been at home in the evening in the first place?

There was no way I could actually ask those questions, and there was no need to ask them anyways.

"... Kyoussuke. I'm leaving everything up to you. Please do this for me."

I took his words of encouragement and gladly accepted the task.

When I arrived at the airport in my destination city, I opened the map my father had given me.

This was my second time overseas (I had a field trip to Hawaii during junior high), but to be quite honest, I wasn't too confident I could actually make it to where Kirino was living.

That's pretty pathetic, you say, considering how I got so worked up and actually got on a plane to get here? Don't be an idiot! I didn't speak the language, had no sense for where I was, and it would be a Herculean task for me just to go into a store and manage to buy something.

So isn't it obvious I'd be scared out of my wits?! Ugh, and if... and if my luggage got stolen here... I didn't even want to think about it. In the worst case scenario, my father had given me the phone number to Kirino's "dormitory" or whatever, and I wouldn't have any choice but to call her out here to pick me up!

But that... that was the one thing I didn't want to do. It was worry for my sister that had motivated me to come out here, so to end up being rescued by my little sister... it wasn't just a matter of not wanting to look pathetic. It was a matter of keeping my dignity as an older brother from getting smashed into pieces.

Luckily, all my worry turned out to be unwarranted. The trip materials that my father had given me were unbelievably thoroughly prepared. There was a guidebook with huge masses of notes clipped to it, and in terms of how to get to Kirino's place from the airport... there were notes on the means of transportation, maps, money, lists of useful phrases to know... anything and everything you could think of was included.

"As expected from dad! He's an amazing planner!"

All of this was in spite of the fact that my father hated overseas travel, and hadn't gone out of the country even once.

So, in order to go meet his daughter... he had planned all this out. It was really something that was like my father to do. I believed that sincerely.

I followed the directions on my father's memo, left Los Angeles International Airport, and got into a taxi.

The cab driver was one of those black guys that Sena might have liked, and when I showed him the appropriate page in the memo that my father had given me (with the correct address written in English), he nodded at me a few times, signaling that he understood.

He then said something that I didn't understand, but I gathered that it was something along the lines of "Got it, boss. Leave it to me."

I wonder if this is okay... he's not going to take me to some deserted alleyway and kill me or something, right...?

Thanks to a certain someone, I had developed a pretty healthy fear for burly-looking guys.

As I dealt with my unwarranted sense of fear, I looked out into the streets of Los Angeles from my car window.

It was the sea. And on the opposite side, beautiful mountains towered over us.

There were around 17 hours of time difference. The climate was warm, and I didn't feel too much different than when I was in Japan.

They called America the Land of Liberty, so I was certain that it would be really different from Japan, but that was surprisingly not the case. Maybe it was because I had just gotten here, but if you asked me what seemed foreign about this place, all I could say was that the roads were wider, the cars ran on the right side of the road, and there were a lot of foreign-looking people walking around.

To be quite honest, I had been more surprised the first time I had gone to Akihabara.

Ignoring my anxiety, the rest of the trip was perfectly pleasant. If I had to make a comparison, it was about as pleasant as driving through the much more deserted streets back home in Chiba. There wasn't any traffic at all. ²

The driver seemed to be turning right even on red lights, and at first I was pretty frightened each time it happened, but it seemed like it was just one of the traffic rules over here. I really had no idea.

We drove for a while on the freeway... and by the time we had reached our destination, it was already nighttime.

"A dorm... this really looks more like a house."

It was a white, two-floor, wooden building. There was very little dirt to be seen and it practically sparkled, so it might have been a new building.

And what's more, it was pretty big. There was what looked like a barbeque grill on the outside, and it honestly seemed like a campsite. I was pretty taken aback, considering how much I was expecting to see an ordinary apartment building.

There were probably a number of these houses around.

² What kind of crazy backwards version of Los Angeles is this guy driving through?

I rang the interphone and waited for a while.

But... maybe it's to be expected from America, but this sure was a huge, luxurious house.

Considering how much that girl liked flashy things, I thought this suited her quite well.

As I was thinking that, the door to the house opened, and a familiar face emerged.

I had expected this to happen, but I still felt a sudden tightening in my chest.

I took a few deep breaths and smiled. I was pretty nervous, so it was probably a pretty stiff smile.

"Hey, it's been a while."

"..... Why..... are you..... here...?"

It was the voice of a little sister whom I had not seen for many months. Ohh, she looks really surprised.

"Hey, come on... is it really that weird for me to come here to see you?"

“I-It’s really weird...”

She didn’t have to be so blunt about it. Also, exactly how heartless did she think her older brother was?

... Tch. I pursed my lips and frowned.

I went on to something my father had wanted me to ask her.

“I heard that you’ve been having health issues lately.”

“... It’s not a big deal. It just feels like a cold.”

“But it’s been like that for two months. I heard it from dad. He’s worried about you too.”

In fact, if I had left him alone for much longer, he probably would have come here himself.

“... I see... so dad was...”

Kirino seemed crestfallen and cast her eyes down at the floor. Her bangs drooped in front of her face.

... Her hair has gotten longer, hasn’t it?

She gave off a similar impression right then to that time she had been bedridden with the flu.

Seeing how she was in a comfortable-looking dressing gown, I guessed that she had been sleeping when I came. Her complexion also looked a bit off, and compared to the last time I saw her, she really just seemed more worn out. Considering she worked as a model, she had always been thin... but what exactly was she going to do if she got any thinner?

“It’s not just dad. Ayase, and Kuroneko, and Saori... they’re all really, really worried, you know? Why didn’t you ever contact any of us?”

“..... Tch. That’s... none of your business.”

Kirino brushed a hand through her hair and bit her lower lip.

It’s sure been a while since I’ve heard her words of rejection. And it’s been a while since I’ve heard her click her tongue like that.

It sure brought back memories... and this unmistakable feeling of annoyance brought back memories as well.

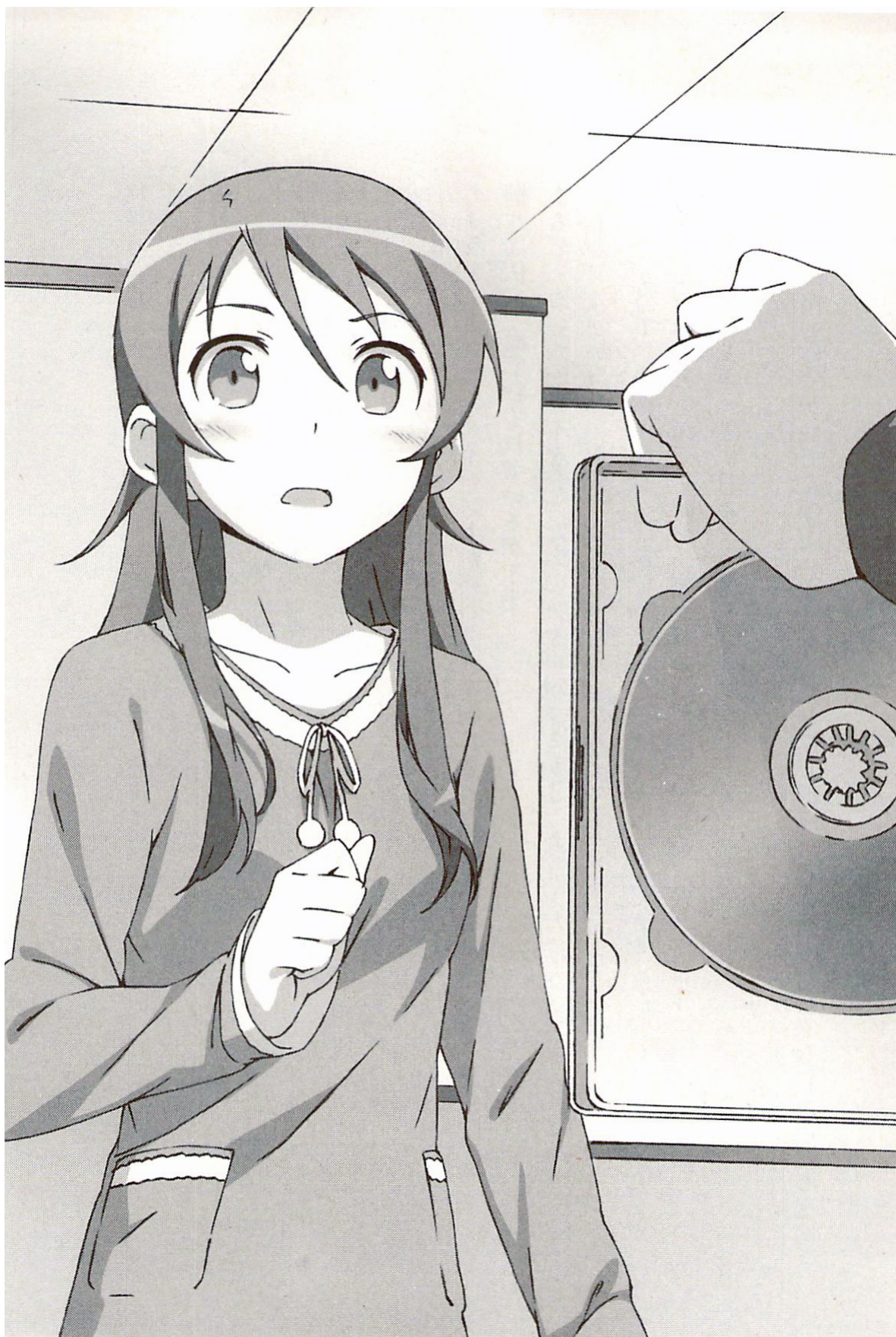
Kirino seemed pretty grumpy as she glared at me, and she hurled more abusive language my way.

“... Also... precisely what did you come here for?”

Was this where I was supposed to look at her and go, “Ah, I’m glad you asked!”?

“Wait just a bit.”

I slowly opened my suitcase and fished through my luggage, finding and extracting a clear plastic DVD case. When Kirino saw what I was holding, her eyes widened. “Ah-,” she uttered.



“That’s... that’s the game I gave you...”

“Yeah.”

What I was showing her was the game disk for “Sister x Sister Sicon Love Story~,” a game that Kirino had once given to me as a gift. And just like President Miura, I flashed Kirino a bright smile.

“I came here to play eroge.”

Part 6

A few minutes later...

“..... I have no idea what’s going on.... Absolutely no idea..... why is it that I came all the way to America, just to play erogé next to you?”

We were in Kirino’s dorm room.

We were sitting on the bed side by side, with a laptop computer placed on the side table.

And we were in the middle of playing “Sis Sis,” the game in question.

We had just gotten past the opening event, and started the main part of the story.

Kirino was sitting there looking grumpy, with a sour expression on her face...

But this was almost an exact replay of the scene on the day when Kirino left Japan.

“But weren’t you the one who told me that you would play it with me?”

“You were the one going on about eroge this and eroge that out in the open, so what else could I say?! How tactless can you possibly be?! If someone heard us, do you know how bad that would be?!”

Right, I had heard that America was tougher on eroge than Japan.

“Well, sorry about that.”

“Tch, do you actually understand? Also, I still haven’t asked you why you were so dead set on playing eroge with me.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

“Do you understand the words that are coming out of your mouth? You flew all the way to America because you wanted to play eroge with your little sister, and you tell me not to sweat the small stuff??”

Yeah, I guess that wouldn’t count as “small stuff.” It would count more as me being a hentai, wouldn’t it?

But if I told her the real reason I was here, she would just get angry. So I didn’t say it.

“... Ugh... I seriously don’t know what’s going on here...”

But even though she said things like that, she honestly didn't seem too displeased about it. Her health also didn't seem to have deteriorated to a point where it was worrying, so things were progressing fairly well. Although, when I say "things," I didn't mean that I had anything special planned.

"Tch, what are you looking at?"

Kirino seemed irritated and clicked her tongue. I stifled a chuckle and looked around the room.

The first thing that I saw was a set of bunk beds in front of me. It seemed like this was a double room. From what Kirino had told me, there were a few of these rooms in this dorm... or should I say house... and around ten girls lived their daily lives here. Of course, all the girls were of similar age, and they were all track stars recruited from various parts of the globe.

But right now, the only people in this house were Kirino and myself. Kirino had asked the school for permission to let me into the dorm, and the school administrators seemed fine with accommodating this sort of "reunion between affectionate siblings." They even offered to prepare a different room for Kirino's roommate (who was currently at practice), allowing us to have the entire night to ourselves. I was pretty grateful.

"Well, I guess we were pretty lucky here."

"... Don't go off and do something weird just because it's only the two of us here."

“As if I would!”

Maybe it would be different if it were a cute kouhai talking to me, but when my arrogant little sister made me aware that it was “only the two of us,” it only served to get me annoyed. She was way too self-conscious, this idiot! As if I would ever lay a hand on my little sister!

“... Hmph, whatever.”

Kirino grumpily turned away from me. A second later, she glanced in my direction.

“You know, you sure seem happy to spend a night with your little sister. Ahh, so gross. Gyaahh, at this rate, you probably went into my room while I was gone and fished through my underwear drawer, didn’t you? And then you probably sniffed them, didn’t you?”

“I. Did. No. Such. Thing!”

This pissed me off. This really pissed me off. I had only seen her for a few minutes, but I already wanted to go back to Japan!

“Just sit there and watch quietly.”

I frowned, and began to left click violently. Even as we spoke like this, our happy happy school life with those little sisters on screen moved steadily on. Being able to talk and play eroge at the same time was a skill I had acquired from past experience. Although, it wasn't exactly a skill I could brag about to friends.

Also, spending time doing this made me suddenly realize something...

"If your roommate is here, you can't play eroge, can you?"

"No, I can't!!"

"Uwaah?!"

I seemed to have hit a nerve. Kirino grabbed the front of my shirt and was almost in tears.

"I mean, I really can't play eroge in front of a innocent, younger girl like that! And I had spent so much effort installing loads of eroge I hadn't beaten onto my laptop just to get them through customs and bring them to America! And then I couldn't play them at all! Oooo... to think I would end up hoarding games but not being able to play them... it makes me so angry!!"

Kirino grit her teeth hard and balled her hands into tight fists. Y-You...!

Don't tell me, you seriously brought eroge to America?!

“Hmph, go ahead and laugh if you want to!”

“There’s nothing to laugh about!”

That was seriously bad! If she got caught with those and taken away, wouldn’t it make the news?

Granted, it’s not like I was one to talk.

“B-But, you still held your ground and restrained yourself... that’s pretty admirable.”

“Yeah... suddenly I understand all too well how those boys feel who wait until their parents aren’t home and then watch porn secretly.”

“So you are playing them!!”

Don’t come crying for help if you get found out! I might be your brother, but I’m not going to fly all the way to America just to try to protect you by telling people that those are my games!

“But look, the first decision point is coming up...”

The two heroines were lined up side by side on screen, and were pressing the protagonist to pick whose bentou was better. The protagonist tried to evade the question by replying that both were equally good, but of course that answer wasn't going to fly... and they were forcing him to choose.

(1) ... Quite unexpectedly, Rinko's bentou is better.

(2) ... Of course, Miyabi's bentou is better.

"In any case, you're going to start with the girls with long black hair, so in this situation, you'd pick Miyabi, right?"

A brother whose eroge tendencies were perfectly understood by his little sister... I seriously wanted to die.

"... H-Hmph. Why are you talking as if you already know my preferences? You're wrong. This time... yeah. That arrogant little sister on the right side of the screen hurling insults at me... I'm going to start with her route."

"Huh? Rinko's route? ... You're going to do that one now?"

For some reason, Kirino seemed strangely panicked.

"W-Wait! You can't do Rinko-rin's scenario now!"

"Huh? Why?"

“You just can’t!”

“What the hell? You gave me this game and told me to take care of it like I was taking care of you. So why in the world would there be a route that I can’t do?”

“You just can’t! Umm... that is... j-just don’t! Also, I gave you that game so that you could play it in your own room when you felt lonely because I was gone!! Why didn’t you play it there?! Why did you have to go out of your way to come all the way over here to play it with me?! How the hell was I supposed to predict that was going to happen?!”

Why the hell was she getting so pissed?! Why was it necessary to put restrictions like that over playing Rinko-rin’s route or whatever?! God, I had no idea.

“W-Well... if you really don’t want me to do it, then I won’t.”

After all, I did like the girl with the black long hair in the first place. I picked the second option, **(2) ... Of course, Miyabi’s bentou is better. By now, I was already pretty used to doing this stuff.**

“Sis Sis” was a rather orthodox adventure game, and the game focused on the two little sister heroines, “Rinko” and “Miyabi.” It was a prototypical double heroine game. It was a game known for the crazy love triangles it depicted between the protagonist and his two little sisters. You’d think a game like this would have a pretty short-lived popularity, but in the major game review submission site “Eroge Critic Space,” it got rave reviews, and people called it an outstanding masterpiece of a nakige¹. As usual, there really was something strange about the world that I lived in.

¹ Literally “crying game,” refers to a game that has very emotional situations and is crafted to bring the player to tears.

Part 7

As we played the game, our conversation grew sparser and sparser... and soon a few hours had passed.

And then, when we had passed the midpoint of the game, Kirino muttered something to me.

“Hey... what about you?”

“... What about me? What do you mean?”

“Ugh, I mean..... You said everyone was worried about me, right? What about you?”

“Of course I was worried about you too.”

Don't ask me something so obvious like that. If I wasn't worried, would seriously have come all the way here?

I answered without looking her in the eyes.

“.... Hmph.”

The conversation dropped again. We continued sitting on the bed side by side, playing the game.

The only sounds that filled the room were the game's background music, the character's voices, and then the *click click* sounds of the mouse.

This time, I was the one who muttered a question.

"And you..."

"... What is it?"

"Were you lonely without me here?"

"Are you an idiot? Of course I wasn't..."

"I see. I was lonely."

"... Huh?"

"W-What are you looking at?"

"N-Nothing... h-hmph, I see. You were lonely without me there."

“Yeah, I was. I was so lonely that Kuroneko scolded me for it. ‘Don’t treat me as a replacement for your sister,’ she said.”

“Siscon.”

“Shut up.”

As the conversation plodded on, we continued playing the game.

Click, click, click, click... The mouse clicks struck up a rhythm.

“... Also, hey. That black one, I heard she started going to your school.”

“Yeah. And because you told her all those strange things about Manami, things got pretty crazy.”

Then I told Kirino about how I made that game with Kuroneko.

Kirino just sat there and quietly listened.

“... Hmph. As I thought... that girl isn’t good at all when it comes to people, so I had guessed that she would end up alone in school. And then, you meddled... and helped her make friends...”

"I didn't do anything at all. Those two just got friendly with each other all on their own."

"... I see."

"You jealous that your friend got taken away from you?"

"Not at all? Tch, she was a friend I made over the Internet after all, so that's what happens. I was getting pretty tired of her, actually, so it's good timing that there's someone else now to take her off my hands."

Kirino and Kuroneko both said the exact same thing...

"Don't say that. You left her without saying anything to her, you know. She was really depressed about it."

"That girl was?"

"Yeah."

I nodded deeply.

"To be honest... I think she wanted to make the game with *you*."

"Hmph."

Kirino turned her nose up. She hugged her knees to her body, and buried her face into her legs.

Her long hair flowed down.

She wanted to see her friends. She wanted to hear their voices. She wanted to play with them... those were the things I felt she wanted to say.

Yes. There's no way she didn't think that. After all, Kirino... really loved her friends.

But despite that, why hadn't she tried to contact anyone?

"I brought over the game we made. We can play it together later."

"I'm fine."

And once again, the conversation ceased. It wasn't an awkward silence. How do I put it... it was more like the kind of somewhat warm atmosphere I felt when I was together with Manami. It's weird saying this considering she's my real sister, but... it was a warmth that reminded me of family.

"My coach barred me from practice today... I told him I could do it, but he wouldn't listen at all... he seemed a bit sad about it though."

Kirino gazed at the screen on which we were playing “Sis Sis” with eyes of affection.

“You know, I somehow feel a lot better after playing erogé.”

“..... That’s good to hear.”

... What a thing to say.

“What you said back there was still perverted though. It’s just that I’m getting to do something I love doing but haven’t been able to do for a long time... so of course I’m happy.”

Although, it was pretty rare to find a girl that was able to so clearly state that what she “loved doing” was erogé. Kirino had definitely already finished playing “Sis Sis,” but to think that she could still have so much fun the second time around... she really must like this game. Well, it makes sense. When she gave me this game, she was brimming with pride after all. So, at any rate... I really didn’t want to say this, even if in my head, but...

I was really glad that I had brought the erogé.

I felt that this was probably a good time to ask the question I had come to ask.

I stopped clicking, and without turning my gaze away from the screen...

“That email... what was the meaning of it?”

“..... It meant exactly what it said.”

“You want me to throw away your entire collection?”

“... Y-Yes.”

“Are you really okay with that?”

I looked at Kirino and tried to stress my point, but she looked away from me.

“... I-It's fine... alright...?”

“So... the Ex Meruru Special Figure, the ‘Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru’ DVD box set, ‘Scatological Sisters,’ ‘Onipan,’ ‘Kasuimo,’... and the secret collection you showed to me right before you left... you're really okay if I throw all that away?”

My question might have sounded crazy to a bystander, but I was being serious.

I had to be sure of what her intentions really were.

“... Yeah.”

A single stream of tears flowed down Kirino's cheek.

But even then...

"Throw it away. All of it."

I see.

She was... she was being serious in that email.

"Why?"

"... Because if I don't do that... this longing in my heart won't disappear."

"Longing?"

"Yes..."

Little by little, Kirino began to explain the situation.

"I knew from the very start that I wouldn't be able to hold my own against all these track stars from all over the world. I mean, my original reason for doing an exchange program was so I could gain experience and get better. So I knew that the start of this would be real rough at first... and that's why I put a restriction on myself."

“Restriction?”

“Yes. Until I could beat one of the athletes here in an official short race, I wouldn’t let myself contact any of my friends back in Japan.”

“...”

So then... so then she didn’t say anything to anybody and left for overseas?

“When I set that up, I thought it was a pretty big reach for a goal. But I believed that if I tried my best with all my strength, I would be able to just barely make it through. I was sure everyone was worrying about me, that I wasn’t being very considerate... but that’s why I just tried harder to win, to make it so that I would be able to talk with everyone again... and I thought if I tried my best... if I tried my best and won as soon as possible, and explained the situation to everyone, and apologized... but...”

Then she teared up, and I could no longer hear her. But even then, I knew exactly what she had wanted to say.

But she couldn’t win. She... ever since she came here, she hadn’t won a single race.

“You... even though you were pulling off such amazing results in Japan...”

And that’s why she didn’t contact anybody. Not even Kuroneko, and not even Ayase.

“But... but I’m pretty used to being in situations like this... so I’m fine with it.”

She gave off a weak, self-derisive laugh, but it was a frail laugh that didn’t even amount to a bluff.

“I thought... I thought about how sorry I was to everyone.”

No matter how frustrated Kirino was, no matter how much pain she was in, she was bound by the rules she had laid out for herself. She couldn’t complain to anyone, and she couldn’t ask anyone for help.

And unlike in Japan, it was even difficult for her to escape temporarily into the world of anime and games.

The one person she ended up contacting... that one person was not one of her friends, but her brother. But rather than asking me for help, she tried to punish herself even further for her weakness. Exactly how stubborn could this girl be? ¹

“... You dumbass.”

¹ The literal word they use here is “stoic,” but I really don’t think the connotation of that word is what they intended in English, so I changed it to “stubborn.”

I understood perfectly well. In other words, all she had was determination.

Even though she seemed to be good at anything and everything, Kirino was by no means a strong person mentally.

In fact, she was inexperienced and fragile. She crumbled in the face of pain.

Like that time she broke out into tears after she had a falling out with Ayase.²

Like that time she broke out into tears after her cell phone novel had been plagiarized.

Like that time she broke out into tears after our parents rejected her hobby.

But even with all that, her senses of responsibility and determination were unusually strong.

She had the drive to succeed no matter what. Kirino had used that drive to break through all obstacles and get to where she was now, but that drive was no longer enough. In fact, it had proven to be counterproductive.

² My first attempt here was “after she broke up with Ayase,” but I didn’t want those naughty people in the audience getting the wrong idea =).

It was like she was slamming her body into a stiff, cold wall made of iron, over and over again.

It's no wonder her health had deteriorated.

I was glad I came. I was glad I came before things had gotten worse.

I turned my eyes back to the game that I had momentarily paused, and started playing again. I didn't look at my sister, and just kept focused on the display.

After all, I'm sure she wouldn't want me to see her cry.

Kirino's face contorted and she was on the verge of tears, but I just kept clicking steadily.

The climax to Miyabi's route was showing on screen.

Not having much longer to live, the protagonist's sister Miyabi confesses her hidden love to him...

It was a sad scene. To be honest, the story was pretty bland, and it just wasn't to my tastes. But for some reason... for some reason, I felt a tightening in my chest.

A delicate piano tune drifted out from the laptop speakers.

I stopped clicking.

-

“Let’s go back together.”

-

“... Eh?”

Swish! Kirino turned, almost violently, to look at me.

“Why are you being like that? I told you to throw everything away!”

“I won’t.”

I answered while still looking at the screen.

“Why-“

“I promised, right? Until you get back, I would protect your collection. So I won’t throw it away. Even if you ask me to.”

“B-But... I... I still...”

She still hasn't done anything... she still hasn't accomplished anything. That's what she wanted to say, right?

I wanted to take Kirino back to Japan with me. Even if I had to, right here, smash the very determination that my little sister had held so precious up until now. It might sound cruel. It might sound like my own selfish desire. But even so, that's what I wanted to do.

Just like how I couldn't just stand by and watch Kuroneko being lonely.

This time, I wanted to use my usual sense of self-righteousness and meddle in the affairs of my little sister.

"I'm... I got so worked up, talked so big to everyone... and went overseas to a sports camp... but not even half a year's passed, and you're telling me to give up and run back to Japan...?"

Kirino hung her head and her body trembled.

And then she looked up and screamed.

"As if I could do that!! How could I do something so pathetic like that?! Who the hell do you take me to be?!"

"You're my little sister!"

Once again, I looked my little sister straight in the eyes from right next to her, and I screamed back.

“That’s..... I don’t know... I have no idea what you’re talking about...”

“You’re my little sister! Why can’t I be worried about you?! You’re not feeling well, right? You’re in pain, right? You want to talk with your friends, to hang out with them, right? Then come back to Japan!”

“I can’t! I mean, I keep losing even to the youngest girl here! How would I ever be able to show my face again to the people I’ve beaten until now?! How should I apologize to them?!”

“You don’t have to apologize for something like that. It’s nice that you have your pride. And it’s nice that you have a sense of responsibility. But you’re taking it way too far.”

“I’m not! If I didn’t try as hard as I did, then I wouldn’t be here in the first place! What could someone like you know about it?! How could you know how much... how much I’ve put into track up until now...”

Bam! Kirino punched the wall with her fist. She grimaced from the pain for a moment... but then she choked her next words out over her tears.

“Someone like you... couldn’t possibly understand.”

“That might be true.”

I acknowledged that. Considering all these years that I had ignored my sister and pretended she didn't exist, I had no right to try and convince her of anything.

"However. Planting yourself here, being stubborn, and staying in America... do you really think you'll get better that way? Your health is getting worse and worse, and even today, your coach told you to stay away from practice, right? But you still just want to charge blindly forwards... do you really think that you can catch up to these other athletes like that? Athletes who are so much better than you are right now?"

"That doesn't matter. I have to win. So I will. That's all."

What an absurd line of reasoning. There's really only so much that pure determination can do for you.

In the far past, Kirino was slow. But now that I saw what was happening, maybe... maybe Kirino hadn't been blessed with too much athleticism.

Rather, for all the natural talent that she lacked, maybe Kirino just made up for it in sheer effort and willpower, and that's how she had beaten all her rivals up until now.

She pushed herself beyond her limits, relying on her iron will.

That was the secret to Kousaka Kirino's speed.

She had her gas pedal pushed to the floor twenty four hours a day. It was fine if the curves continued to be manageable, but once there was a hairpin turn, even if she knew she was going to crash, Kirino couldn't slam on the brakes. After all, she couldn't win any other way.

"You can just come back again later. You're way too panicked. Come back for a while, regain your health, get back to full strength, and then you can come back and challenge the others again. Alright? Is that asking too much?!"

"Shut up! I'm definitely not going back!"

I swear, I don't think anything I say matters anymore. It just goes in one ear and out the other.

However, I couldn't just give up now. Kuroneko's curse wouldn't allow that. I didn't want blood to spurt from my entire body, and to die after writhing in agony.

Even now, I took a leaf from her book, and not caring about appearances, I spoke honestly.

"You little...!"

"Kyah!"

I wouldn't listen to her grumbling anymore.

I grabbed her shoulder with both hands and looked her straight in the eyes.

“I’m really lonely without you!”

I pleaded with her.

“... Wha-“

Kirino’s body stiffened, and I pleaded with her from the bottom of my heart.

“A lot of the things you said made sense! But so what?! What do I care?! To be honest, Kuroneko and Ayase, they don’t even come close! Without you I feel really lonely, so I came to bring you back! That’s all! Have a problem with that?!”

The bed creaked and swayed as I spoke.

I let out a sniff. How pathetic... I really had started crying.

This was bad. There was seriously something wrong with me. How lonely of a person was I?

Kirino was struck dumb too, and sat there with her eyes wide and her body rigid.

“... Y-You...”

“... Let’s go back together. If we don’t, I seriously might die.”

And unfortunately, that was how I sincerely felt.

I really was hopeless... terribly, terribly hopeless...

But in the end, those were my own self-centered, unembellished feelings.

Those were the words that a lazy brother was trying his best to send to his overworked little sister whose attitude was on the verge of ruining her.

“You don’t have to try so hard anymore. You don’t have to be that amazing. Even if you hate me. Don’t pay attention to what other people say. If there’s someone who wants to complain about you even though you’re trying so hard, then let me send them flying for you.”

I was suggesting something pretty selfish, even by my standards. Right now, I was trying to hold Kirino back. I was trying to tempt my little sister who was trying so hard, to frustrate her attempts to succeed.

I wanted my little sister to be happy. I wanted her to be happy, somewhere where I could see her.

Although, it was pretty shameful how much my own ego was coming out here. Older brothers were probably all like this.

Right?

“... Idiot aniki.”³

She called me that again.

But hearing her call me that really didn't feel all that bad.

Although, I would never tell her that.

“When we get back, let's go to Akiba again. Of course, Saori and Kuroneko will be with us. And when it gets to August, there's also summer Comiket. If Kuroneko goes as part of a doujin circle, how about you help her sell her books? And how about going around with Saori again and meeting the people from all the famous circles? I'll probably end up holding the heaps of things you buy, but I'll deal with that for you. So...”

³ Once again, an honorific reserved for elder brothers or males someone is really close to. Generally considered a term of endearment.

“... I already know what you’re trying to say.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It just gets on my nerves. Also, my shoulders are starting to hurt. How long do you plan to grab your little sister’s shoulders?”

Kirino was no longer crying. She had returned to the abusive little sister that I remembered, and a bold smile reappeared on her face.

She batted away the hands I was using to hold her by the shoulder and stood up.

“... After all, I have somewhere I need to be.”

Part 8

It was a few days later. I was together with Kirino, and we had landed together at Narita International.

We proceeded along a long passageway, almost like a procession of ants.

In the end... Kirino decided to come back to Japan. She cancelled her study abroad program. It was actually a lot easier than I thought it'd be for her to withdraw from the program. It seemed that, considering how competitive the program was, it was common for people to drop out. It made sense.

And I still hadn't figured out the reason my little sister had let go of her own iron determination in order to come back.

Did my argument actually persuade her, or was there another reason?

In either case, Kirino wouldn't blame anybody else for all this. She wouldn't go up to anybody else and say "This is your fault!"

She was just that kind of person. As she walked beside me, her expression was nonchalant and bright, but you didn't have to be me to see that she was just putting on an act.

"Dad's going to come meet us in his car."

“I see.”

We grabbed our luggage and went through customs. The minute we went through the spinning gate, we saw someone running towards us. The girl stopped and seemed out of breath, her shoulders heaving up and down.

It was Kuroneko.

It was the first time I had seen this girl like this. Kirino looked at her with her eyes widened. She was left speechless. Her mouth opened and closed a number of times, but the words had a hard time coming out.

“..... You.....”

“... Long time... no see...”

Kuroneko looked like she was having a hard time breathing, and muttered that while remaining expressionless. She was wearing her usual Gothic Lolita costume, although it had been quite a while since I’ve seen her in that. And of course, I was the person who had told her the flight we were taking and our arrival time. And so, this was the moment of reunion between two friends who hadn’t seen each other for quite a few months.

“... Wha... you... why are you so out of breath? Did you run here from the bus station or something because you wanted to see me so badly?”

“... Don’t be ridiculous... haah... haah... we haven’t met in... a few months... and that’s the first thing you say to me? ... As always, you just a woman with no manners... aren’t you...”

Was she seriously alright? She was panting pretty heavily there. How out of shape was she? Where the hell did she run here from? And as expected from Kirino, even though she was really happy Kuroneko had come to meet her, she just spat out unkind words instead.

“Geez... you two are the same as always.”

I watched over the two of them with a satisfied smile.

“Y-You idiot. You’re an otaku shut-in, so don’t overdo it.”

Kirino desperately tried to keep herself from smiling, and walked towards Kuroneko.

“Here, have some water.”

Kirino handed Kuroneko a half-drunken bottle of water. Kuroneko downed the remaining contents of the bottle and sighed. “That wasn’t necessary...” she grumbled. And then...

Standing right in front of Kirino, Kuroneko blushed and mumbled softly.

-

“Welcome... back.”

“..... Yeah... I’m home.”

-

Kirino gave Kuroneko a shy smile back.

These two difficult girls were being honest with each other, for just that one moment.

Faced with this once-in-a-lifetime scene, I tried to etch the sight into my memory.

After that, the conversation got much more jumbled.

They hurled insults at each other over the game that Kuroneko had made, were quite excited as they made plans for the next summer Comiket, and tried to get each other to admit that they were lonely without the other there.

It was almost as if they were trying to make up for lost time.

It reminded me quite a lot of that time a year ago when they were arguing with each other in a McDonalds in Akiba.

“... Hmph. So you just lost every match and ran back here. That’s pretty pathetic.”

“Tch, you idiot. Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m going to practice more, and then next time I’ll knock out every single person over there.”

“Oh? You weren’t even a match for them last time, and you think you have a chance to win?”

“Fu fu fu fu...”

Kirino slowly took out her iPhone. She fiddled with it for a bit, and showed the screen to Kuroneko and me.

It seemed like an online news article. There was a photo of a girl running across a track. She had sleek, dark-brown skin, and her hair was tied up into a ponytail. She wasn’t that tall, but her legs were long and slender. She had the air of a supple thoroughbred. The article was written in English, so I couldn’t read it, but it seemed like she had won some track tournament.

“And this is?”

Kuroneko asked the question. Kirino seemed quite proud and pointed at the iPhone screen.

“This is Ria Hagry-chan. She’s probably the fastest elementary schooler in the world... and she was my roommate in America.”

“So in other words... she’s faster than you?”

“I can’t even begin to match her like I am right now. She’s really cute, really young, and even on an international scale she’s really impressive. She’s one of the poster children of the sport. Hmph, and she also gets on the news too.”

Kirino laughed self-derisively. To think she could also get like this...

“... But, I’ve beaten her once.”

Kirino’s tone suddenly brightened, and she puffed out her chest. She didn’t sound like she was lying. My little sister would never lie when it came to her matches. She had a crazily high sense of pride, after all.

“Hmm... so you won against her just once?”

“Yeah. It felt more like I had caught her by surprise though...”

“But you still won.”

“..... Yeah.”

"I see. Well, that's good then."

Kuroneko nodded, seeming quite satisfied.

That's great. So you didn't come back after only losing and running away.

At least, that's what I saw in her eyes.

In reality, she had made a single dent in the walls of the world. Kirino had said she hadn't accomplished anything over there... but that wasn't true, was it?

"By the way..."

Kuroneko smirked a bit while she asked her next question.

"... Exactly *when* did you beat her?"

"Nghh..."

For some reason, Kirino seemed at a loss for words.

"T-That's a secret."

Her face flushed red and she turned in the opposite direction.

Kuroneko looked like she had guessed everything, and gave a huge grin.

“I see. So you just were lucky and challenged her when you were in top form.”

“You really are infuriating, you know.”

“... Hmph... and what do you mean by that, I wonder? If you don't say it clearly, I won't understand, you know?”

“I don't know what you're talking about!”



Kirino once again turned away from Kuroneko.

And then she realized that I was still there, and for just a moment, her eyes opened wide. And then...

She stuck out her tongue at me and made a face.

-

... What the hell just happened?

I had no idea. All I could do is stand there by myself, confused.

Well, whatever.

I cleared my throat, and turning towards my little sister who was standing on Japanese soil for the first time in a few months, I spoke.

-

“Welcome back home, Kirino.”

END CHAPTER 4

END VOLUME 5

Afterword (Beware of Spoilers!)

This is Fushimi Tsukasa. Thank you very much for obtaining this copy of this book.

Compared to the volumes that have already been published before this, this volume was quite different, but how was it?

To me, this was the hardest volume to write. Actually getting it released and on store shelves is a huge relief to me (I feel like I say the same thing every time, but it's the honest truth). I really have to find a way to get these books out without panicking this much...!

Let me just take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped me collect references for this book. There are various factors that prevent me from writing any specific names here, but I owe everyone a lot of thanks for being able to get this book out.

And then, onto the fanletters.

To I-akira-sama from Mie Prefecture: That illustration of Kirino in a swimsuit was really great. Please take good care of your little sister. To Kaida-sama from Saitama Prefecture: I don't know what's going on either with Kanzaki-sensei and what happened with those green creatures. To A-kana-sama from Aichi Prefecture: I should thank you as well. To N-gawa-sama from Kanagawa Prefecture: I completely agree! I also like all the slender heroines that have been appearing lately. To K-Nishi-sama: Thank you for telling me about your real fujoshi little sister. To K-hon-sama from Tokyo: your reassuring support really got me motivated! To T-da-sama: Kyouzuke is going to do his best from

here on as well! For the gachapin Midori-sama: I'm sorry for this coming so late, but... happy birthday! To O-ta-sama from Okayama Prefecture: To be honest, I think Kyouusuke thinks that way as well. To S-mura-sama from Hokkaido: Yes, I definitely received it! To K-da-sama from Fukushima Prefecture: I'm really happy you were surprised by that. To H-sama from Nagano Prefecture: So that's how that started. I'm really grateful to Tanigawa-sensei! To M-ko-sama from Chiba Prefecture: Yeah, that's really close to me. Also, congratulations on your otaku awakening! To T-towa-sama from Gifu Prefecture: That was one of the best letters I've written so far! Amazing! To T-oka-sama from Kagoshima Prefecture: Lucky Star is amazing! To K-mura-sama from Shizuoka Prefecture: That really made me think about how there might really be girls who are like Kirino.

Really, thank you very much. Everyone was incredibly encouraging.

For those who contacted me by email or any other means, thank you very much. I apologize for not being able to respond, but please know that I was very happy when reading all of them.

The next volume will have lots of topics that I couldn't put into this current volume, and there will be an emphasis on comedy. Please look forward to it.

- November 2009, Fushimi Tsukasa.

Translation Credits

Translator and Site Administrator: NanoDesu

Supervisor: Whitesora

Editor: hikaslap, Saki

Typesetter: DaigakuOtaku

Translation Group : NanoDesu Translations